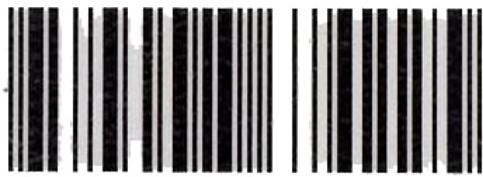


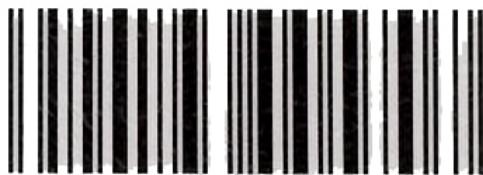


シーキューブ
CubexCursedxCurious

水瀬葉月
Illustration たんたがため



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水瀬葉月

Illustration さそりがため

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—シーキューブ—
Cube×Curseδ×Curious



Scene01:癒しの宴

大秋高校文化祭《癒し》

病棟一三一四号室》、いよいよ開店～!!



や ち は る あ き
夜知春亮

白衣姿は案外凜々しかったにも拘わらず、<おくすり>の盛りつけに樂しみを見いだす枯れ少年。

ファ

オールドモデルな元気印リトルナースは、はじめての「お仕事」を無事にこなせるのか……?

むら まさ
村正このは

並サイズの布地ごときでは隠しきれぬ、こぼれんばかり（一部こぼれてる）のお色気ナース。今巻のコスプレ変化は必見!!!

Scene02:父と母、そして兄。

「大人しく死んじゃつて欲しいわー！」

オラトリエ・ラブドルムナーグ
常にその身を水に浸し、水着姿で木のオールを持つ謎の女。「ある目的」のために文化祭に紛れ込む。

「余所見はいけないという
忠告を忠告します」

ン・イゾイー

研究室長國に所属する研究員の少女。護衛役として拍明に同行する。

「久しぶりだね
錐霞」

やみまがりばくあさ
閻曲拍明

「閻曲拍明の研究室長國」室長にして、錐霞の兄。拍明が姿を現した、その真意とは……？

Scene03:寂しさの処方箋



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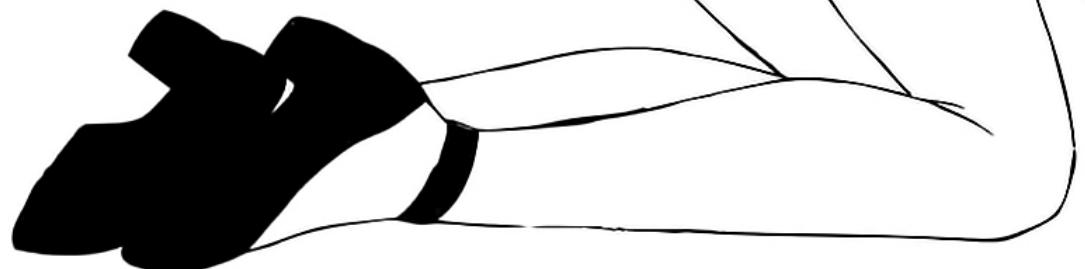


Designed by Toru Suzuki

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-シーキューブ-
CubexCurseδxCurious

水瀬・葉月

Illustration さとりがため



Prologue

The location was a hospital.

Hence, Haruaki was working in a white coat of course, busy dispensing "prescriptions."

"Doctor, we have an emergency patient! «Nutrient Pack» and «Yellow Medicine», one of each, stat!"

"Drats, there's really no time to rest, is there... Got it! Also, the «Milky-White Medicine» is ready!"

"Acknowledged, I will now deliver it for the patient to take. Please hang on and try your best, doctor!"

Rushing into the dispensary, a nurse picked up the medicine Haruaki had prepared and hurried out of the room again.

Yes, a nurse. Hospitals could not function if there were no nurses. If anything, it would be more accurate to say that this hospital existed solely because of the nurses. Haruaki and the others were merely backstage crew for supporting them.

Haruaki looked up at the sound of footsteps. His view was dominated completely by nurses. There were standard nurses dressed in unadorned, pure white outfits, nurses wearing especially striking uniforms in pink, as well as—

Drum roll!

"Uh... Uh... «Crimson Blood Pack», two orders! No snacks!"

"Hey Fear-chan! You should call it 'medicine,' okay? Medicine!"

"Oh right. No medicine needed!"

Hasty footsteps rushed into the dispensary—The silver-haired girl, who had rushed into this classroom, quickly corrected herself after being reprimanded by another nurse. That nurse (or rather, classmate) then giggled and said:

"Okay, then hand the prescription over to Yachi-kun. Oh yeah, you've been busy working all this time, right? If you're tired, go ahead and take a ten-minute break. I'll handle the outside for you."

"Hmm~ I'm not tired yet... But since you offered, I'll rest for a little while."

Holding the prescription in her hand, Fear approached as she wiped sweat off her brow. At this moment, her gaze carelessly met with Haruaki's.

"Hmm? Hey Haruaki! What are you spacing out for!? Hurry and get to work!"

"...Yes yes yes. Two cups of tomato juice, is that right? I'll get right to it once this is done."

"They're «Crimson Blood Packs», okay!?"

After correcting Haruaki politely, Fear poured herself a cup from the water cooler prepared for staff and sat down on a nearby chair to gulp water down noisily. Finishing it in one breath, she even burped loudly like a drunken old man. Despite claiming she was not tired just now, Fear was probably quite exhausted.

Before the cultural festival, Haruaki had been worrying to some extent, but Fear seemed to be working hard at her assigned duties. Thinking "if there's a chance, I should have a look at how she's working outside" to himself, Haruaki busied himself with dispensing medicine while he surveyed the classroom. Up until now, he was so busy that he did not even have time to pay attention to the surroundings.

The back of the classroom had a corner that was segregated using a curtain of cloth. That was the space reserved for the girls to change. The clothes-changing battle taking place earlier had ended already, so it was now quiet inside. The rest of the space served as the break area / kitchen / boys' changing room. Portable stoves and cutting boards were set up on long tables. A fridge had been moved into the classroom specifically. Boxes of various supplies such as paper cups. All this contributed to a scene that felt completely dissonant for a classroom. Apart from Haruaki, there were also several boys dressed in white coats, busy dispensing the prescriptions they were responsible for.

(Wow~ Everyone is working hard... Then I can't slack off either. That said, it sure would be tough if I had to stay here dispensing medicine all day.)

Suddenly, Haruaki wondered when his shift would end and looked up at the clock. In actual fact, this was not the Class 3 homeroom where Haruaki and Fear belonged but the neighboring Class 4 homeroom. In this sense,

there was indeed a sense of dissonance although the placement of their clock turned out to be exactly the same as in Class 3.

It was currently ten in the morning. An hour had already passed since the shop (hospital?) opened for business. Time sure flies especially when I'm busy—Haruaki could not help but come up with this novel idea.

However, being busy was better than idling around, right?

Shifting his gaze slightly lower from the clock, he read off the words on the blackboard, written in chalk using quite a few colors:

"United Nurses Cafe «Recovery Ward, Room 1314» finally opens for business! Provided all the doctors and nurses work hard in cooperation, the throne of number one sales should be easily in our grasp! Let us work together and provide the best treatment for the patients, YEAH~~! ~signed by Hakuto Taizou, Hospital Director~"

Indeed, being busy was better than idling around and Haruaki would rather today be a hectic day.

Because happening only once a year, today was—

The cultural festival.

Chapter 1 - Cultural Festival / The Party Begins With Nurses Everywhere / "Nurses excessive."

Part 1

Everything started with the lightspeed nomination of the festive male classmate, Hakuto Taizou, as the "cultural festival executive committee's assistant." Due to his intense speech during homeroom regarding their shop for the cultural festival, even Kirika, who was originally supposed to summarize everyone's opinion, was overwhelmed by his vigor.

According to him, what people sought in the current era was still healing.

According to him, speaking of "healing," one would naturally think of nurses. With that, the perfect power for drawing in customers was secured.

According to him, for the sake of achieving higher sales volumes, one must consider the turnover rate. In other words, they needed to find shop space that could accommodate the more customers the better and as many staff as possible, as well as a spacious work area. Furthermore, the cultural festival allowed shops to be run by at most two homerooms as a joint venture. Hence, I hereby propose that we cooperate with our neighbors of Class 4 to open a nurse cafe...!

Given Taizou's enthusiasm, the interests of some of the boys who agreed that nurses equaled healing, as well as the curiosity of some the girls who went "Why not? After all, we don't have any other ideas for a shop and dressing up as nurses sounds like fun," the combined result was that the venture surprisingly went full steam ahead with astounding speed—

A few weeks after Taizou was nominated as the candidate, in other words, today...

United Nurse Cafe «Recovery Ward, Room 1314» was ready and approaching its moment of opening.

"Okay, «Crimson Blood Pack» done!"

Taking out freshly squeezed tomato juice that was kept in the fridge, the juice was then sealed into a thick plastic bag that imitated an intravenous drip bag. The original plan was to drink directly from the bag with a straw, but due to hygienic (cannot be reused) and economic (should not throw away after a single use) considerations, they ended up deciding to deliver

the drink in the bag, then have a nurse pour it out into a paper cup. Although it was no longer an IV drip, what mattered most was probably the atmosphere.

"Then following that... «Milky-White Medicine», right? The assorted cheese platter seems to be quite popular."

Haruaki swiftly placed the cheese onto the platter and arranged them neatly. Although he had never worked at a restaurant to serve customers, having done similar tasks at home frequently, this was not a particularly tasking job for him.

Handing the arranged platter over to a nurse who was free, Haruaki finally found a rare moment of respite.

"Looks like there's a brief interlude after all that work. Why don't you have some water and take a break?"

"Oh~ Thanks."

Haruaki straightened his back and instantly downed the cup of water that Fear had handed over to him.

"Phew... It feels like I'm alive again, this is really the world's tastiest water~"

"Hmph hmp~ After all, it's the water I poured, of course it'll be tasty. I don't really know why, but people say that my getup seems to have loads and loads of healing effect on people's hearts and souls."

"Loads and loads huh..."

Haruaki re-examined Fear's outfit. Although she was dressed up as a nurse like all the other girls, Fear's costume was custom made to order. It was neither the standard white style nor the pink design.

Reportedly, the man in charge of this cafe had borrowed the outfit from a certain laundry store's owner (even Haruaki could hazard a guess who it was). Speaking of which, the outfit sort of counted as—retro style.

Namely, the kind of retro nurse outfit "worn by girls illustrated on legitimate medicine cans."

At first glance, parts of it somehow felt quite similar to a maid costume. A cute flounce skirt with a pure white apron. She was even wearing a dainty little headdress.

Furthermore, she was carrying a massive syringe plushie, roughly requiring both arms to hug around in circumference, on her back as custom equipment. Kana had brought this today from her personal possessions. After declaring "I found this at home! It should suit you very well!", she went ahead and modified it to be worn on one's back, forcing Fear to wear it. Although Haruaki clearly could not tell what meaning there was in carrying that thing, the plushie syringe did match Fear's outfit rather well, so he could not really stop Kana.

"Healing effect huh... Somehow, all I can picture is you holding that massive syringe, giggling as you try to inject people on sight... Hmm, feels horrifying actually. In other words, you are totally not the top candidate on my list of people who are suitable for a career change to nursing."

"W-What are you talking about? I'll curse you! I'm the angel in white, my existence equals~ healing! That's also how Taizou persuaded me with all his effort!"

"Haha~ So 'loads and loads of effect' must be that guy's saying too, right? Come on, could you please not believe everything that guy says..."

While smiling wryly at Fear who began to mutter "what do you know, you shameless brat—" to herself, Haruaki took a seat on a chair on the side. Taking a slight break now shouldn't bring about divine retribution, right?

In terms of arrangements for Class 3 and Class 4's cafe joint venture, Class 3's homeroom was used as the shop space to serve customers while Class 4's homeroom served as the work area. Precisely because the entire classroom was used as a preparation area, not only could Haruaki sit down for a break like this, he was also able to pitch in and help out immediately if things got busy. Taizou's sales target should be progressing smoothly, right? However—for some reason, Haruaki had a feeling that Taizou's vigorous advocacy for this joint venture must have ulterior motives.

"Hmm~ I'm finally able to return for a break..."

"Welcome back—Kono-chan, how are things next door?"

"Good heavens, there's really tons of people. The line has even overflowed into the corridor."

"That's really a lot. You should take a short break."

"Then I'll gladly take your advice~"

The girl in twin braids—Konoha—staggered over, but she smiled radiantly as soon as she spotted Haruaki.

"Thank you for your hard work, Haruaki-kun! You also look very dashing in that white coat!"

"R-Really? Konoha, you're the one who's been working hard. It seems hectic as hell outside."

"Yes. There will be another influx of prescriptions soon, so you should rest as much as you can now, Haruaki-kun... Ah, I should drink some water.

Konoha knelt down before the water cooler and began to pour herself some cold water. Sitting not too far away from her, Haruaki unintentionally glanced at her outfit—and frantically diverted his gaze.

Class 4's Konoha was dressed as a nurse, naturally, but unlike Fear's unique outfit, hers was one of the pink uniforms. But that alone was already sufficient in destructive power. A short skirt plus sexy garters, as well as—Pushed up from within the pink fabric, rather than an angel of healing, that bulging bosom was evocative of a mother earth goddess instead. Added to the fact that she was crouching down, a clear view was offered of the deep cleavage from above. Why wasn't she buttoned all the way up? Or perhaps... It wouldn't button...?

"Damn it!" (poosh)

"Gwah? W-What just stabbed into my ear? What are you doing, Fear? Don't go pricking me with your syringe mindlessly! Luckily, it's only a plushie!"

"Hmph, I'm very disappointed that this is only a plushie! Your shamelessness is already considered pathological. In that case, you need to be treated by my injection! This is simulation no.1 of when I actually obtain the real syringe of the wonder cure for shamelessness, the first thing I'll do is a direct injection into the afflicted area—The brain! A direct injection!"

"I told you already, don't dig into my ear!"

"Glug glug... Phew~ Please don't make a ruckus in other people's classroom, Fear-san."

"Nuu! Clearly it's all your fault for showing off your chest, how dare you say that to me...!"

"H-How am I showing off?"

Konoha covered her chest and awkwardly turned her body away to the side.

"I can't help it at all, this outfit is clearly the largest size already, but I can't button up the top no matter what..."

"K-Konoha-san is right! This cannot be helped, Fear-chan! You're going too far in blaming Konoha-san like this. If you want to blame someone, blame me for preparing the clothes!"

"Nwah! You scared me there. Don't go popping out without a sound, Taizou!"

Just as Fear pointed out, Taizou had suddenly started standing in the classroom without anyone noticing. He was also dressed in a white coat like Haruaki.

Taizou glanced at Konoha but immediately turned his gaze away with his face all red. Then desperately facing a corner of the ceiling, he muttered to himself: "Nonono, I am a gentleman after all, so I can't look. No, her image has already been branded deeply in my mind, so it's okay... No, it's not like that." Then as though he recalled something, Taizou turned around to face everyone again as he stopped his gaze from drifting below Konoha's neck and said:

"Consequently! S-Sorry, Konoha-san... I, Hakuto Taizou, am to blame for not preparing a full range of sizes. It's all my fault, the fault of Hakuto Taizou. if you want to blame me, scold me, or gossip with me, I'll gladly accept any and all of it!"

Perhaps Taizou's sparkling eyes and vigor were too intimidating, Konoha retreated slightly and answered:



"I-I see... No really, umm... I'm not angry at all, it's just that..."

"I'm the one who's angry. Jeez, it's really shameless... Muu, I've got an idea! Just let this girl wear a white coat as a special case! With that, you can conceal that figure of hers that's nicknamed 'The Excess Meat.' I'm sure Cow Tits will happily raise both arms in agreement, right?"

"That nickname is too insulting! I demand that you take it back!"

"Fear-chan, there's no need to word things that way—Wait a sec, white coat? Konoha-san wearing... a white coat... on top of a nurse uniform... A white coat... A glasses-wearing female doctor... A-Ahhh! That also feels like... I think I picture something amazing——!"

Taizou's eyes began to wander randomly while he babbled incomprehensibly. He was completely unaware that Fear and Konoha were inconspicuously edging away from him with stiff expressions. Poor guy.

At this moment, a massive shadow suddenly appeared behind Taizou's head and there was a loud crash.

"Ow!?"

"Shock therapy—! Ahahaha!"

"...What are you talking about in other people's classroom? Absolutely ridiculous."

Immediately making their entrance was Kana in a pure white nurse uniform along with Kirika who was still wearing the normal school uniform. Kana was holding a human-sized advertising placard. In other words, that was the object responsible for the very loud impact on the back of Taizou's head.

Everyone present decided to ignore Taizou for now, who had fainted while clutching his head.

"Oh, Class Rep, you've returned? How did the publicizing go?"

"I checked out the storefront just now and it looks like it's working quite well. But my decision to act as a bodyguard really was correct... There were a few suspicious men trying to approach slowly with cameras."

"Oh dear~ This outfit's effects are really amazing, nishishi."

As Kirika murmured with a sour look, Kana happily tottered around, clutching the hem of her nurse uniform. The two girls stood in stark contrast to each other in many ways.

"Taizou, how much longer are you planning to slack off? If you've got time to waste her, go and serve as the bodyguard for the next publicity girl!"

"Oh! What have I been doing here... I feel like... I feel like I've forgotten about something that I must do first..."

Konoha thought "Oh no!" to herself as her eyebrows twitched. A white coat on top of a nurse uniform—She most likely did not want to dress up that conspicuously, right? Hence, she immediately made a perfect smile of courtesy and said:

"Uh, you were going to make a tour throughout the school building to pull in customers, yes? Taizou-kun? Protecting the nurses is a very important job. Please do your best."

"Oh... Ohoh, Konoha-san is cheering for me...! Very well! I'll set off now!"

His memories rewritten, Taizou left the classroom with the girl who was relieving Kana's shift. He had an expression of utter bliss on his face.

Everyone present saw the festive man off, bidding farewell to his back with their lukewarm gaze. Next to speak up was the festive girl who formed a pair with him.

"Okay~ Great, I will work hard at serving the customers outside too~ Then later, I'll also need to help out at the swimming club's booth, so I'd better work twice as hard for now... Ah, the sight is so dazzling! It's a bit late by now, but Fear-chan and Konohacchi are truly too dazzling for me! Pretty & Violence!"

"Dazzling—" Kana added her own sound effects as she covered her face in an exaggerated manner and fell over backwards. Her impression of "Violence" definitely stemmed from Konoha's particular body part that was full of destructive power.

"Hmph hmpf, you're looking good too in your outfit, Kana."

"Yes, it suits you very well."

"Thank you for the compliments—But here right now, I'm going to back myself further into a desperate corner...!"

Kana began to search for something with a rustling sound. Her action caused Fear and Konoha to become baffled. Kirika glanced at those three nurses as she walked over to the long table that was used to cook orders.

"I'll leave the waitressing to you and the others, Kana. As for me, umm... I'm not used to serving customers, so I've decided to help out in the kitchen."

"Fufufu, do you really think you can get away that easily, Kirika-san!"

"What...?"

Finding the atmosphere a bit strange, Kirika looked back just in time to see Kana slowly approaching with a big paper bag.

"All the girls must take on the role of nurses... Isn't it a bit too naive of you to think you alone could be exempt, Kirika-chan? Serving customers in an inexperienced manner is part of the cultural festival's fun whereas watching that happen is also part of the customers' enjoyment—These words have struck a deep chord within me, thus I have reserved an awesome secret weapon only second to Fear's outfit...!"

"W-Wait a minute! Calm down, Kana! I definitely won't wear it, I can't! If you ask me to wear that type of nurse uniform with my arms and legs exposed—"

"Don't worry~ I know you don't like wearing revealing clothes, Kirika-chan. However, this outfit doesn't expose too much. In fact, it covers up even more area than your usual uniform."

"No, but... Y-You should reconsider!"

Kirika extended one hand forward as though she were saying "If we discuss properly, you'll surely understand" as she backed away slowly. But very soon, her lower back bumped into a long table.

Aware of why Kirika would rather die than wear something revealing, Haruaki felt that he had to step up and rescue her in this situation.

"Hey Kana. Class Rep already said she doesn't want to wear it. Don't force her, okay?"

"T-That's right. How about this, isn't it fine if I work doubly hard for Kirika's portion as well?"

"Uh—I believe that forcing someone to do something against their will is not too appropriate. P-Peace should come first!"

"No matter what you guys say, this is one matter I won't back down from at all. Say, Kirika-chan, I don't really mind if I need to help you change by force~! Kukuku, stripping Kirika-chan feels like... a very fun idea..."

Kana moved her hands eerily while slowly closing in like zombie.

Once the distance shrunk to zero, things would be over. In actual fact, were Kirika to resist seriously, pushing Kana away should be an easy task, but of course, she could not do that. But that said, if Kirika allowed herself to be stripped without resisting, Kana would find out her secret...!

The separation between Kirika's body and Kana's hands continued to shrink.

30cm... 20cm... 10cm.

Even Kirika's gulping was audible. Then—

"I-I got it, okay! Fine, I'll change, I'll change, okay!"

Stopped.

The zombie stopped her hands and her eyes returned to sanity.

In contrast to Kana's grin, Kirika slouched her shoulders dejectedly and sighed long and hard.

If the outfit is too revealing, I'll simply refuse to wear it. No peeking allowed! If anyone peeks, even if it's Kana, I'll get seriously mad! By the way, please keep watch for me, Fear-kun and Konoha-kun. If anyone tries to peek, help me stop them with full force! What? Of course Yachi needs to be stopped as well! What the heck are you talking about, Kana!? It obviously goes without saying. How absolutely ridiculous!

Before changing, Kirika had already established many rules with her face all red. Only then did she finally disappear into the changing area at the back of the classroom. As the curtain hanging down from the ceiling quivered slightly, Haruaki felt embarrassed for some unknown reason.

A few minutes later, the curtain swayed again and Kirika poked her head out from the gap.

"...I-I'm changed. I'm wearing the outfit now, but..."

"Then come on out—What do you think, it's not very revealing, right?"

"It's... not, indeed it's not. But... ummm... I still feel that this sort of outfit, is really—"

Kirika's gaze wandered, and for some reason, made eye contact with Haruaki a total of four times. Perhaps she was still seeking assistance.

"Uh—umm... I still think that if she's not used to it, just forget about it, how's that? You should know how challenging it is to make people dress up like this when they are unused to cosplay, right?"

Hearing Haruaki's words, Kirika narrowed her eyes and glared at him, murmuring to herself: "Hmm... Damn that Yachi! So what he means is: he neither wants to look nor is he interested? How truly frustrating..." Instead of helping, Haruaki had apparently incurred her wrath. Why was that?

But that apparently lit some sort of fuse, causing Kirika to surrender in self-abandonment:

"D-Damn it, I know, okay! If you want me to come out, fine, I'll come out! Here, have a look!"

The curtain was flipped open and appearing before everyone's eyes was—

Kirika was dressed in the traditional Japanese divided trousers called the hakama. Her upper body was clad in a kimono with wide sleeves. Combined with the hakama, it was perfect. Furthermore, she was wearing a big retro-style apron. Of course, there was also a large nurse cap on her head.

Seeing Kirika nervously clutching the hakama with both hands, speechless with her head bowed down, her face even redder than before, Kana once again made that pose as though she could not keep her eyes open due to the brightness.

"Kyah—! Goodness gracious, so amazing! So dazzling! Too charming, a retro nurse outfit in the style of the Meiji era... Too adorable! I've ushered in the birth of an even greater threat to the world—!"

"Wow... Compared to everyone else, it really is different. Low exposure too... I think it's quite nice, Kirika."

"Truth be told, this impression of purity suits you very well, Ueno-san."

Konoha lightly tugged at her own outfit and said: "I only have a normal nurse outfit, so I'm feeling a bit envious of you~" Haruaki discreetly whispered in her ear:

"So... The nurses back in the Meiji era, do they really dress like this?"

"Uh—I've never paid much attention so I have no idea about the details... But I do feel that something is off somewhere. But what does it matter? After all, it suits her well and it's very cute!"

"Really...? Oh well, I don't mind either."

"Hey hey hey, Akki! You're the only one here who still hasn't expressed an opinion! Kirika-chan says she must hear it."

"K-Kana!"

Kirika looked up once but immediately bowed her head again. Meanwhile, her hands were repeatedly clutching and releasing the hakama, indicating her extreme unease. For some reason, even Haruaki began to feel disquieted.

"No, umm... I-I think it looks very good. How should I put this? It's very much in Class Rep's style."

Haruaki felt as though he heard Kirika sigh in exhalation, but that could just have been his imagination. Because in the next second, he heard Kirika talking in a nasal tone of voice:

"R-Really? Well~ This outdated, modest and uncute outfit definitely suits my style very well. In other words, that's the kind of person I am!"

"No, that's not what I meant!"

Haruaki frantically tried to explain, but Kirika would have none of it. Crossing her arms before her chest, she turned her face to the side:

"N-No explanations necessary, Yachi. There's no particular meaning in my wearing this outfit. I am neither happy nor delighted about this, neither do I harbor extravagant hopes for a certain someone's opinion. Whatever, it really doesn't matter. Truly, absolutely ridiculous... In any case, I'm already wearing it, so are you satisfied now, Kana?"

"Yes, satisfied—With this, Kirika-chan can also help outside now!"

"Seriously, I'm trying this only because I don't have a choice. Don't blame me if any problem arises. After all, this really is my first time waitressing."

"Don't worry. Fear-chan's performance has been commendable too."

"...Really?"

"What! Shameless brat, what's with that skeptical gaze of yours!? I really am performing quite well!"

Just at this moment, a patter of noisy footsteps arrived.

"Uh—sports drink... No! Four portions of the «Nutrient Pack» and three portions of «Dark Green Medicine», please! Hey, those of you standing there! If you've got nothing to do, come out and help!"

The situation out front seemed to be getting hectic again. Fear and the girls readily answered the nurse's request and starting to leave the classroom.

"Excellent, it's time to put on a good show—it's time for everyone to witness the power of the Head Nurse, me, Miyama Kana!"

"Taking customers' orders, returning to the kitchen, then delivering the prepared orders back to customers. There's no difficulty here. Yes! I can surely do it!"

"Ueno-san, you don't really need to be that serious. After all, the customers are mostly students. Just think of it as a game of let's pretend and it'll be fine."

"A game of let's pretend...!? That makes me feel more and more embarrassed. But seeing as you've gotten used to it so quickly, Konoha-kun, I can probably handle it."

"What, Cow Tits is already used to playing let's pretend? For some reason, that sounds so shameless to me... After all, it must be the obscene kind of let's pretend that involves those breasts, right?"

"W-When did I ever!?"

A lively commotion. Haruaki felt like using "just as always" to describe the situation, but then it seemed a little inappropriate.

As much as it was something the girls engaged in frequently, as much as that kind of noisy dispute was not anything new.

But one thing was certain, this was a special and irreplaceable commotion that could only be seen during no other time but the cultural festival.

Part 2

Haruaki enjoyed his work. Although all he needed to prepare were easy things on the level of assorted cheese platters, crackers and sandwiches, it felt happy enough to know that other people were eating his food. This was pretty much the same as what he usually did at home.

Haruaki continued to concentrate on his work and it soon came time for his shift to end. Intending to take full advantage of the hard-earned break, he decided to take a stroll and visit the other shops in the cultural festival. Checking the shift schedule, he ended up discovering that Fear, Konoha and Kirika all happened to be approaching break time as well. Hence, deciding to invite them to go check out the other shops, he went to see how they were doing.

Taking off his white coat, Haruaki went next door. Peering in through the back door reserved for staff, he found the interior decorated like a sickroom to match the theme. The blackboard was covered up by a curtain of white cloth. The desks were also covered up with the same type of white cloth and decorated with flower vases and baskets like those used for visiting the sick. Naturally, most evocative of a hospital ward were the nurses moving around between the desks.

"Eh, Haruaki-kun?"

Still wearing the nurse uniform with her bosom almost bursting out, Konoha walked over to him, carrying a binder (actually a menu) of patients' charts.

"Hi! It's the end of the shift, I wanted to ask if you girls were free, then how about we go check out the other shops in the cultural festival?"

"Yes yes, of course! Could you please wait a short while? Once my replacement for the next shift arrives, I'll get changed instantly."

"Also, I want to check out how Fear is working. Is she doing things properly?"

"Well, sort of, however..."

Haruaki followed Konoha's gaze and immediately found the little nurse with the giant syringe on her back.

"Uh—I'd like this «Round Pill» from the menu."

"Hmm~ The round pill. I'm scared of saying this too loudly, but this is actually awesome...!"

Fear brought her face close and even snickered eerily, causing the student making the order to be frightened by the creepy atmosphere.

"You said you're scared of saying this too loudly... Th-This isn't anything illegal, is it?"

"Of course not, it's something so good it's unbearable. How should I say this? It's something that feels very soft and fluffy, like being in a dream... Or let's put it this way. I-I... I remember it starts with 'mar' and is spelt with nine or ten letters..."

Marijuana—Of course not.

"...Marshmallow."

"Yes, that's the one. Thanks for your help, Kirika."

Passing behind Fear by chance, Kirika intervened to help clear up the misunderstanding. Although her stiff expression was quite concerning, she did seem to be working her hardest in the retro outfit. Feeling a bit worried, Haruaki decided to focus his attention on her longer.

"Oh, may I order?"

"...Please go ahead."

"Excuse me, I'd like a cup of water here."

"...Coming."

Seemingly glaring eyes and a poker face seemed to be Kirika's default. Perhaps she felt very embarrassed because she was unused to cosplay? But very unbelievably, the retro outfit actually matched her poker face quite well. She looked like a stern and dignified daughter hailing from a warrior family, looking after patients in an inexperienced manner.

Meanwhile, Fear was, for some reason, hard selling her suggestions to the customer from just now.

"But I still recommend this one! The «Brown Medicine»! This was added to the menu only because of my strong recommendation. It's crunchy and

savory, even tastier than marshmallows. I really think you should order this and reward me with a piece as tips."

"I-I still don't get it, anyway, please get me an iced coffee first..."

"The «Chilled Black Liquid Pack» and the «Brown Medicine», right? I got it!"

"No, I didn't order any medicine! Ah~ Wait up, Miss Nurse!"

...In a certain sense, Fear turned out to be hard at work as expected.

Haruaki and the girls were casually strolling through the school building, surrounded by the noise and bustle that filled the cultural festival. Compared to the school's normal state, this would be like an alternate reality. There were many visitors in casual clothing and students in their uniforms, a yelling sandwich man, people walking about in theatrical costumes probably for publicizing the drama club, people dressed in mascot costumes that looked absolutely stifling in the heat—All these people were walking disorderly in the corridors. From outside the windows, wafted in the various aromas of sauces and baked flour.

Changed back into her uniform, Fear was directing her inquisitive gaze in all directions like a random laser.

"Nuohoh~ Amazing... The fair from a while ago was also great, but I never expected something similar would be held in school as well! Unbelievable, this is so new to me!"

"Now you know what a cultural festival is, right?"

Fear nodded solemnly with a "Yes" but then she answered in an overly forceful voice:

"No idea!"

"You still don't get it!?"

"You dummy! I said no idea exactly because I now know what a cultural festival is about. With all sorts of random things and no idea who is doing what, it's hard to describe in a single sentence... After all, it's just chaos followed by chaos, that's what's called a cultural festival! Anyway, it's all very new and fresh!"

Dressed back in her uniform like Fear and sighing in relief, Kirika also agreed with her description.

"Since it's only held once a year, it's also quite a fresh experience even for us. So Fear-kun's experience should be even more intense than ours, right?"

"Yeah, everything today has felt quite fresh, like when I first started greeting and serving customers... Fufufu, and it turns out even simpler than I imagined. In that case, working part-time jobs should be a piece of cake...!"

"Wait a minute, don't get so full of yourself just because of this. A real job is miles apart from this."

"Listen to him. Besides, today's customers are mostly students and they also know that we're not professional servers. That's why things went so smoothly... If these were real customers, a single mistake could be fatal. If you make a serious blunder, you'll either get fired instantly or face the fate of lawsuits."

"Lawsuits... I've seen those on television. Like messy divorce cases, right? Apparently you'll be forced to pay huge sums of money, so that's really troubling."

Fear frowned with worry. Haruaki smiled wryly as he thought "that's scaring her too much" to himself.

"Actually, you'll be fine as long as you don't screw up badly. To prevent screwing up in a real job, let's work hard today. By getting used to the atmosphere of working, you'll help yourself gain experience. So don't take things lightly and work seriously in your next shift. After all, this is important job training."

"That's true, practicing is important. Of course I'll work seriously. Besides, I've been very serious all along."

Despite thinking "your seriousness actually ends up making people uncomfortable~" to himself, Haruaki asked Fear as a test:

"...Do you... enjoy working?"

"Of course!"

As expected, she answered instantly. Swaying her silver hair, Fear turned her head around and displayed to Haruaki her blooming smile. She really looked quite happy and blissful, causing him to wonder "Does something that wonderful really exist in this world?"

"Because everyone keeps saying 'Thanks' to me! Although I think I'm not doing a great job in delivering the food and drink sometimes, people still thank me in spite of that. Strangers were thanking someone like me. S-Someone... like me."

"...Really? Then that's really a good reason to be happy."

Haruaki understood the hidden meaning in her pause between "someone" and "like me." He knew that this hidden meaning consisted of words that did not need to be said. Neither were they words one would want to say. Naturally, Kirika and Konoha also understood very well.

—Someone cursed like me. A tool of torture and execution like me. Someone who only harms humans like me.

"Yes, very happy. That's why I like working... Fufu!"

Fear suddenly gulped at this time and looked towards the front, her silver hair swaying. Staring at the bustling cultural festival, she muttered:

"Really... This is so fresh. So many things I've never come across nor seen. There are still so many new things in this world—That's the message this 'cultural festival' event seems to be tell me. Looks like I'm still very ignorant. So I've renewed and adjusted my plans—In other words, 'I want to know.' Through all sorts of ways, I want to understand all sorts of things."

A pure and innocent wish. How truly delightful.

Standing behind Fear, the trio all spontaneously smiled in agreement.

But in the next second, Fear's originally calm voice suddenly turned into her usual, loud as heck voice.

"Oh, what's that? Immediately, something appears that I want to know about! Lemme see... A haunted... house. Say, Haruaki, what kind of shop is that? Hurry and tell me!"

"Yes yes yes... Rather than a shop, the inside is actually more like a maze. Then people dressed up as ghosts and monsters will jump out to frighten

the customers. It's a tasteless shop for people who enjoy scary memories. That said, we don't really have the right to make that comment."

"—You have any objections to tastelessness, human?"

"Uwoah!"

Haruaki turned towards the source of the voice. A set of desks and chairs was arranged in front of the haunted house classroom. Sitting there was a female student of exceptionally exquisite beauty. Looking bored, she was resting her chin on her hand, staring at Haruaki's direction with disinterest.

"This is your class? What are you doing? Though I guess it's obvious that you're stationed at the reception."

Hearing Haruaki's response, Shiraho smiled in a manner that would inspire abject terror in the viewer.

"Since it's obvious, I should advise you not to ask, human. Such stupid behavior merely serves to highlight the fact of your stupidity, that's all, although stupid as you are, you could not possibly understand that."

Jeez, I simply felt that you might be rather unsuited to a task like doing the reception... Aren't you being excessively harsh? Oh well, this probably implies that you're getting used to being a member of your class.

"Uh— ...Anyway, how's the situation?"

"If you want to go in, I won't stop you. No matter how much emphasis they devote to cosmetics and atmosphere, it's ultimately a high school cultural festival after all. I'll feel troubled if you enter with excessive expectations."

Shiraho casually answered Konoha's question as she glanced at her watch. Then frowning, she murmured:

"Where did that Hinata wander off to... There's no time to spare until Sovereignty's break time. Seriously..."

At this moment, a female student poked her head out of the classroom and said:

"Oh Sakuramairi-san, it's time for your shift to end—"

"Is that so? I understand. But Hinata still hasn't returned, do you know where she went?"

"No idea... After all, it's that girl we're talking about, she probably ran off somewhere to take a nap?"

"Worst of all, that's very likely what happened. Whatever, I'll rest a while inside and then go look for her. After all, given the way she's dressed, she should be found instantly."

Who could have thought that Shiraho could converse so naturally with her classmates? How novel. As this impression surfaced in the minds of Haruaki's group, Shiraho pushed her chair and stood up in front of them. However, something seemed to roll out from under the desk as a result.

"Hmm? What's this?"

Fear bent down and picked it up. It turned out to be a chibi-proportioned, super deformed plushie doll in the form of a boy wearing a black coat. Probably the protagonist of some video game? There was also a note safety-pinned to its arm. On closer examination, written on the note were the words "This is required for the event, please do not touch♪"

"Who knows which class put it here at some point in time. Truly such a bother."

"By the way, just now when I followed Kana to publicize the cafe, I remember seeing quite a few dolls identical to this one."

Kirika commented with her head cocked mildly, but Shiraho continued to speak as though she were looking at pebbles:

"Utterly meaningless without bound. If you want to take it away, I won't stop you."

"If only it were more furry and fluffy, but this kind... Let's just put it back."

Saying that, Fear placed the plushie back under the desk. Shiraho made her way towards the classroom with disinterest. Beside the exit curtain, there seemed to be an area reserved for staff. But just at this moment, the exit curtain was raised as people came out. Two female students were leaving the haunted house.

"Ahaha, that wasn't scary at all~"

"Aren't haunted houses always like this? Do people still use konjac jelly anymore? Bursting out in laughter just now, I felt so sorry for them—Hiyaaa!"

"...?"

Glaring coldly at the girl who had screamed at the sight of her face, Shiraho simply lifted the curtain in the path and entered. Rooted to the spot, the two girls looked at each other and said:

"Ah, that scared me to death...!"

"This final part was really scary. Who is that girl? She looks so much like a beautiful female ghost... If she wore white clothes inside, I'm sure little children will burst out crying from fright."

"But the scary thing is that I can't believe she's just a girl like us. This world is too unfair..."

The two girls sighed, slumped their shoulders and continued forwards. As Fear silently watched them leave—

"So... What should we do now? Let's go in for a look?"

Arms folded across her chest, Fear turned her head to motion at the haunted house with a solemn expression.

"But let's not, I guess. After hearing those two girls' review, it seems like Shiraho is the scariest. But the problem is that we're not afraid of her, so in other words, it's totally not scary inside... This is a shop for enjoying being frightened, right? In that case, isn't it meaningless for us to enter?"

Then the group basically toured the school building and experienced the cultural festival atmosphere. Outside, they observed the situation in rival cafes, browsed the flea market and took a look at the photography club's exhibition.

"Hmm, all these different kinds of shops are so interesting! If only Kuroe could come as well."

"Yeah—It was great that the beauty parlor took a day off for the sports festival, but today happens to be Sunday."

Brokenhearted over "the many customers who had to pick this day for their appointments," Kuroe was currently working hard at her shop. Naturally, had there been no appointments, she probably would have taken an unscheduled break and visited the school to have fun.

"But it can't be helped. Let's tell her all about our experiences when we get back."

"Yeah. By the way, I've been wondering for some time now, where's that aroma coming from?"

"That's the smell of crepes, right? Uh..."

"It's probably wafting in from the courtyard? Since all the stalls cooking with an open flame need to be located outside, let's go over and check it out later."

"Stalls huh... It really reminds me of the fair earlier."

The autumn temple fair held nearby earlier... Many things had happened at the time as well. Just at this moment, Haruaki suddenly recalled something.

"Wait a minute, Fear... Are you carrying any money? Last time you forgot to bring money to the fair, but you should have earned some for helping with the beauty parlor's opening, right?"

"Th-That's the first money I earned for my labors, of course I'm keeping it somewhere safe."

"You~ Clamoring about eating rice crackers all day and night... Don't keep expecting you can get cash from my wallet all the time! Please remember that my money has to take care of the family's living expenses!"

"I got it okay... Hmph mph~ Your money~ is my money~"

"It's useless, Haruaki-kun. Clearly she doesn't understand at all. Look, she's even making up her own song!"

Conversing among themselves, Haruaki's group exited the photography club's exhibition classroom and continued on their way.

"Are there any activities in the school building over there?"

"The special classrooms block... I remember the classrooms there. They've always been provided for the cultural clubs to use. Like for showing the film research club's videos or exhibiting the calligraphy club's works, etc."

"It feels like it's filled with an air of maniacs... And looks like there's virtually no one there."

"Maniacs would take offense to that comment, Haruaki-kun."

"I'm not really sure what's going on there, why don't we go and have a look?"

At Fear's suggestion, the group advanced through the connecting corridor and was about to enter the special classrooms block. However, they encountered an unexpected person.

The manga research club's poster had an especially cute and popular character drawn on it. A certain person was staring at it intently, rooted to the spot—

"...Zenon-san?"

"!"

The cool beauty and secretary instantly turned to face Haruaki's group with a literal "whoosh" sound. The aura she gave off seemed to be saying "the scene an instant ago was an illusion, clearly and definitely an illusion, got that?"

"Good morning, Yachi-sama, Fear-sama, Konoha-sama—and Ueno-sama."

Kirika's eyebrow twitched and then she spoke respectfully as though she were talking to a teacher:

"I didn't expect you would know my name."

"Since the superintendent stands as the highest authority in the school and I am the secretary who assists him, remembering all the faces of the entire school's teachers and students is naturally part of my job."

As only befitting of the perfect (disregarding her interests and hobbies) and beautiful secretary, what a shocking truth to discover.

"Really? I know that the superintendent and Yachi's family are acquainted on a personal level... But you really don't need to use the '-sama' honorific with my name, Hyoujou-san. After all, I'm merely a student."

"—Then let me express my utmost apologies for I rarely have a chance to interact with ordinary students... Please excuse me for my poor manners, from now on, I shall call you 'Ueno-san'."

Zenon spoke as she took a light bow respectfully. Her personality was still rigid as always.

"By the way, why are you here?"

"I know! You must be like us, experiencing the surprises of the cultural festival through a tour, right? If you want to walk around with us, I have no objections."

"No, because the superintendent is out on a trip as usual, I am trying to contribute despite my meager power by patrolling the school grounds. Have you encountered any problems so far?"

"Nothing... Did something happen?"

"Currently received are the following reports: one alleged theft of personal belongings and one case of a fight involving a student from another school. Other than that, there are various sundry reports on a video voyeur, someone furtively touching girls' bottoms when walking past them, cashiers giving the wrong change, loss of an important ring, a celebrity supposedly visiting our cultural festival, sightings of a wet woman youkai, etc etc."

"...Wet woman?"

"I recall that's a youkai that emerges from bodies of water to attack humans on shores. Her hair is always dripping wet."

Despite Haruaki's group asking trivial questions, Zenon answered in full seriousness. In response to her rigorous attitude, Konoha smiled wryly and ambiguously as she spoke:

"U-Umm... So what you mean is this: although nothing major has happened, you're out patrolling just as a precaution, right? Your efforts are commendable, Zenon-san."

"Please do not say that. Even if no major problems have been reported, situations could possibly arise in deserted areas. Besides, while the superintendent is away, I am managing the school in his stead. Particularly on days like this when many outsiders enter and exit the school, one could never be too careful. That is why I am patrolling areas with few people, like here for instance—"

She stopped speaking abruptly in an unnatural manner. After surveying the surroundings, Zenon's gaze rested on a certain spot, just outside the window.

"...But truth be told, I originally did not expect anything to happen, but it looks like that thought needs to be amended."

Following her gaze, Haruaki's group was rendered speechless and holding their breaths.

Looking through the window, at the back of the school building—

A girl in her gym clothes was lying there collapsed.

Who could have done it? Why? But now was not the time for seeking answers to the various mysteries. Without saying a word, Zenon turned and started walking. Haruaki and friends also followed and rushed down the stairs.

Then Haruaki and company discovered the shocking truth.

That girl... Yes, that girl—

Part 3

Was only sleeping.

"..."

"Eh? Ah, wah—! I fell asleep again, oh on! What's the time now, what's the time?"

The female student hastily wiped away her drool that was like the Niagara Falls and surveyed her surroundings frantically. Despite wearing an unfashionable pair of glasses, she did not resemble the quiet and hardworking type of student. Her careless airs were quite reminiscent of Sovereignty's.

"What's going on here... But thank goodness you're okay."

"Good grief, how did it turn out like this—This is totally deceptive!"

"Wah! W-Why am I getting scolded... the second I wake up?"

Zenon stepped forward and approached the cowering girl.

"Luckily, nothing happened to you. Why were you sleeping in a place like this?"

"Eh? Umm.. I-I'm the type who can instantly sleep anywhere, any time... Because I absolutely love naps. My mother said that in light of that, she really wished she could change my name, but I actually like my name quite a bit. But then again, many people don't know how to pronounce my name without furigana, so it's a bit troubling."

"...You can tell us about that another time. What I want to know is this: why are you sleeping here in your gym clothes?"

"S-Sorry. I was wearing a mascot costume to publicize my class' shop, but halfway through, I felt super hot and found myself walking here. I was thinking I'd take it off and rest for a bit, but I ended up going 'Ahhh~ So much cooler—' and lying down briefly. But who could have expected time to fly so fast, for it became now within the blink of an eye! Without my noticing—I become dressed like this in my gym clothes! Speaking of which, eh? Strange? My mascot costume is missing!"

The girl suddenly began to panic. Standing up, she nervously walked around and even patted the dirt off from the soles of her shoes. Naturally, she did not find anything there.

"Uh... In other words, the mascot costume you were wearing is now gone?"

"That's right! I clearly took it off and put it down over here! Wahh... This is terrible! That costume was rented... Who could have taken it to wear...? Putting that mascot costume on with all that smelly sweat!? Wah—That feels so embarrassing! Wait a minute, could it be some kind of maniac!? A maniac with a fetish for sweat?"

The girl descended into serious confusion. Kirika lightly shook her head and said:

"It's a relief that we don't have a fainting incident, but instead, it's turned into a theft incident..."

"I'll surely be scolded to death by everyone! Who knows how much it'll cost to pay for compensation, will I be able to afford it? —I can already imagine her angry look! She's gonna sneer and harshly reprimand me with a tongue lashing! But strangely enough, why do I feel a little happy!?"

Despite seeming a bit incomprehensible, the girl remained in an apparent state of confusion. But because she was too noisy, she really did not evoke any sense of tragedy.

Just at this moment, Fear tilted her head and asked:

"Why would you give up so easily? You don't plan on searching for it?"

"But... There's so many people and I don't know who stole it..."

"If those are your reasons for not searching, that's truly stupid! Okay, I know! I'll help you look for it! This is nothing to be concerned about, because my mission is to do beneficial things for people!"

"Eh? Umm, I'm really happy you're helping me..."

Haruaki had known that things would turn out like this, but could not bring himself to leave so simply. And from his personal perspective, he had no objections. Glancing at Konoha at Kirika, he found them both giving off a feeling that said "Can't be helped, it's her~" and shrugging in exasperation. They did not have any complaints to voice either.

"So Zenon, we'll also help to resolve this matter."

"Honestly, that really would be a great help... But do you have a plan?"

"Plan? Logically speaking, it's simple. Hey, I'm asking you, is that mascot costume very valuable?"

Fear asked and the girl shook her head:

"It's a costume from that «Bludgeoning Gentleman Gasha Skull»^[1] special effects hero show... Hmm—Even if you try to sell the outfit, it probably won't fetch much of a price..."

"In other words, it probably wasn't stolen for money, right? Then that means this! Just as you said just now, it's definitely a freak who has a fetish for clothing dripping with sweat from girls! Then it's meaningless not to wear it, so this guy must be walking around openly in the costume right now! Based on logic, the culprit should be obvious!"

"Umm... Fear-san, to be honest, there are too many things I'd like to object about in your logic. Even if the guy is a freak as you say, what if he took it home before wearing it?"

"Freaks could not possibly possess that kind of patience and self-control!"

"You're really jumping to conclusions..."

"Shameless brat, do you have any objections? If you've got a better idea, let's hear it!"

...He had none. Seriously speaking, there was too little information.

Seeing Haruaki silent, Fear hummed proudly.

"If there are no other suggestions, then it's decided. Why don't we first locate the guy who's wearing the mascot costume? Hmph hmpf~ This damn freak! I'm gonna catch you and make this enemy of women suffer divine retribution, kukuku!"

As a result, Haruaki's group began to take action for the sake of resolving the case of theft that had happened during a certain girl's nap.

Furthermore, approximately one member of the group had already altered the goal of retrieving the stolen goods to making the freak (as yet unconfirmed) suffer divine retribution.

Part 4

Meanwhile, the suspect who had stolen the mascot costume—Nikaidou Kururi—was behind a different building in the school.

"Huff... Huff..."

While supporting her hands on her knees, she caught her breath. So hot, so damn hot, but that was only to be expected. After all, her entire body was currently wrapped up in a poorly ventilated costume with a skull masked design. More importantly, her current goal was fleeing as fast as she could from the hindrance that possessed horrifying skills.

Kururi recalled the face of the man she had been looking for.

Furthermore, there was the person who had effortlessly deflected her sudden attack, even going so far as to strike back mercilessly—that dark-skinned woman who seemed to be that man's bodyguard.

"Damn it..."

Cursing the unexpected hindrance, but finally breathing steadily, Kururi straightened her body.

What she sensed now was a gaze.

Did that woman catch up? Kururi narrowed her eyes and surveyed her surroundings, but there was not a single soul in this deserted area behind the school building. Only the noise of the cultural festival could be heard in the distance.

(Are my nerves overreacting... No!)

The other person was above, standing upright on the school building behind her, a strange figure looking down towards her. Furthermore, this person was definitely not a student at this school, for the figure's appearance was completely out of place, carrying on the shoulder a long, rod-shaped object wrapped in some kind of cloth.

Who was it? An enemy?

Just as Kururi reflexively entered a stance, the figure on the roof also moved.

Effortlessly going over the fence, the person descended by thrusting the rod into the school building's outer wall a number of times.

"Hmm...!"

"Yo. Hello. By the way, who are you? Our gazes just met but I felt that you're a bit strange, so I came down here. Are you perhaps my enemy? If you're uninvolved in my affairs, then it's fine... But then again, you did witness the scene just now, after all... So perhaps, I'll have to give you some pain."

Faced with the figure that landed before her eyes, Kururi could not help but hold her breath. The person was a woman in parka with the hood covering her entire head.

Although they had never met before, Kururi could ascertain one fact from the woman's words. Furthermore, there was her bizarre appearance, the weapon in her hand, as well as the strange phenomenon with the way the weapon stabbed into the wall without resulting in a single falling fragment. Kururi was absolutely certain.

This was someone from the Family "You're... Landfisher...?"

Surprised, Kururi murmured involuntarily. Hearing her response, the woman cocked her hooded head and said:

"Eh? Never would I have thought you'd recognize me, then you're clearly not someone uninvolved... So, who are you? What are you doing here?"

Her attitude remained unchanged but Kururi could sense faint murderous intent coming from her. Kururi could only blame herself for the slip of the tongue. By this point, it was impossible to feign innocence—Kururi bit her lip and replied:

"I should be the one asking you that. Aren't you supposed to be dead already? I know there were such orders."

"You really know how to poke someone in a sore spot. Indeed, you're completely correct... Sigh, it's all because many things went wrong. Right, since you have inside information, are you perhaps a member of the Family as well?"

This time, a cautious answer was required.

The problem was: did this woman know already?

That the Family had already collapsed and lost its symbol.

Also—the one who finished the task was Kururi, present right here.

If the woman knew, then she would surely attack Kururi. In that case, concealing her true identity would be best for now.

"...No I'm not. I belong to neither the Family nor other organizations—Right, I guess I count as a helper for the Family. That's why I know about what's going on and I'm not your enemy."

Kururi made up excuses as she put away her battle stance because there was nothing to gain in fighting this woman now. Perhaps this attitude worked, for the woman nodded lightly and said: "Oh right~ There's that category as well." Then she returned the weapon she was swinging around back to her shoulder. Based on Kururi's answer, that weapon could very well have attacked her without hesitation. That said, the risk currently had not disappeared entirely yet.

Deciding to play it safe for now and stay in dialogue, Kururi felt compelled to find out at least why this woman was here. More than likely, she had not fully accepted Kururi either. One false step could cause her to attack indiscriminately.

"So, little miss helper, what are you doing here?"

"I... am just searching for someone, but it's got nothing to do with the Family."

Feeling that deception would seem unnatural, Kururi went with the truth—The fact that she was searching for a man. Although she did not know his name, Kururi knew his face and physique. Although she had discovered him just now in the school, he had a bodyguard intervening by his side. Once Kururi began to describe the man's most obvious characteristics, the woman's attitude changed. She clicked her tongue impatiently and remarked:

"It's that guy? That's right, he's already here... I suffered lots from his nagging and the other stuff. If I were to find him, I'd definitely attack before anything else."

Hearing her answer, Kururi could not help but frown for a second. She must keep those words firmly in mind. However, the most important thing right now was to understand the woman's goal. Asking "On the other hand, I'd like to know what you're doing" resulted in—

"Yes, it counts as a coincidence. In actual fact, I'm looking for someone too. If that person is not found, I can't fulfill my goal."

Kururi asked "...Objective?" but the woman answered very simply: "It's not something I really need to hide."

A goal superficially similar to hers but different.

Her answer provided Kururi with the following information, namely that "this woman did not know about the Family's current condition."

"But I'm facing a troubling difficulty. Although I know what the guy is called and I know what he looks like from the photograph, Japanese faces look all the same to me. I can't really tell them apart unless I examine closely. But there's people everywhere today, making me all confused. Ah~ Perhaps you might actually know him? He's a student at this school, his name is—"

Someone Kururi knew. Appearing in her mind was the friendly face of that boy.

Kururi racked her brain to decide how she should respond.

It was dangerous, but using this woman could achieve her goal. No, thinking over this calmly, there was no other way but this. Hence—

"I know about that guy and what he looks like."

"Ohoh~ Really? Then please help me look for him."

Her reaction was just as predicted. Kururi nervously gulped and said:

"I don't really mind, but..."

"But what?"

"But I hope you can help me out as well. I'm looking for the man I told you about just now and need to make contact with him, but there's this really strong bodyguard by his side. You have a grudge against him as well, right?"

The woman pondered for a moment, but—

"Hmm... Well, surely the other side will make a move on me once he discovers my presence here, after all? If the end result is a huge fight anyway, there's not much difference. So, even if one of our goals is fulfilled first, let's maintain our cooperative relationship until the other person's goal is achieved as well, okay?"

"...No problem. But if you are rendered immobile along the way, I'm going to continue without you. Because I can't possibly take care of you to that extent."

"What a merciless helper. Fine with me, it's a deal."

Kururi sighed.

This was a gamble. She had no idea how things would turn out, depending on what order they find their targets—The only things she could do now was pray that her own target was found first. But if this wish did not come true, there would be a problem.

In truth, she did not know if finding the boy was related to achieving her goal or not. But asking too much about the matter would probably arouse the woman's suspicions. Since both sides' goals were similar, there was no need to actually search in the same manner. Kururi would simply follow her own path. Hence, what would happen to the boy was honestly irrelevant to her. But if this woman achieved her goal first, things would become tricky to some extent. Worse comes to worst, depending on the situation, Kururi might have to sabotage in an indirect manner...

"By the way, why are you wearing this crazy outfit?"

"Because your target knows who I am. Also, you have no right to criticize me for my crazy outfit."

The woman giggled. Water dripped from her red hair exposed by the gap in her hood. Kururi discreetly clenched her hands under the mascot costume and made a certain decision in her mind.

This cooperative relationship had many problems but she had no options currently.

After all, Kururi had an unshakable goal, a task that she needed to complete at all costs.

Namely, to find that man, use this woman to defeat the bodyguard, then make contact with him.

Furthermore—She must find out the answer.

Part 5

After finding out about the mascot costume's appearance from the female student, Haruaki and his group started walking around the school building, parting ways with the girl and Zenon. This was because the girl needed to return to her class to explain the situation and also—

"It's probably meaningless, but I'd better send someone to monitor the school gates."

Zenon had gone off to busy herself with other tasks. Since the costume was large and not easily concealed, plus security had been alerted to stop anyone carrying anything strange, monitoring the school gates should not be meaningless.

Apart from that, the group also considered the idea of using a public announcement. But if the suspect knew he was wanted, he might start brandishing a knife in reckless abandon. This could possibly develop into the following situation: "large scale arrest operation undertaken among crowds of students where the suspect is discovered → panic → cultural festival suspended." In the end, they decided to give up on that method.

While the group was visually searching for the suspect, Fear, whose furious glare was saying "Hurry and come out if you wanna live, freak!", suddenly narrowed her eyes.

"Nuu!? Th-That's—Take this!"

"Uwah? Hey, wait up, Fear! That's a cat, it's a cat!"

Haruaki frantically chased down Fear who was about to charge into a tiger-striped cat mascot and forcibly dragged her away. After he apologized for Fear's rash behavior, the mascot muttered "Scared me to death..." emphatically while leaving.

"That's totally wrong! We're looking for a humanoid mascot, right? Something similar to a skull mask."

"I know, okay. It's just that whenever I see furry object, I'm overcome with the urge to pounce."

"...Search seriously!"

"I-I'm being serious! Just now, it was only... Recharging my energy, I was just replenishing my motivation! Anyway, those are my needs! Okay, let's go!"

Fear waved her hands as she spoke then began walking in front. Haruaki and Konoha exchanged glances and could only shrug helplessly. Just as they prepared to catch up to Fear—she had already disappeared. More accurately, she had taken a great fall with intense momentum. Due to the suddenness of the situation, for an instant it seemed as though she had vanished from view.

"Zuwaa—!?"

Crash thud!

A plastic trash can in the corridor was tragically flattened by Fear's bottom. For the sake of personal safety, Haruaki decided not to express any opinion regarding her destructive power (namely, Fear's weight).

"W-What on earth are you doing? Are you okay?"

"You're being too impatient. You should calm down a bit before taking action..."

"Ouch ouch..."

Still sitting on the floor, Fear rubbed her backside where the impact had struck. Thinking "Never mind your backside, hurry up and cover up those striped panties!", Haruaki frantically turned his gaze away from the sight between Fear's legs.

Very quickly, Fear noticed Haruaki's gaze and held down her skirt as she stood up, blushing red.

"Oooooh... Why is this corridor so wet! That's the reason why I slipped. What are the people in charge of cleaning actually doing!?"

Fear's fury was justified. The floor under her feet was as wet as though someone had knocked over a bucket of water. With clearly no water faucets nearby, this was really bizarre. Fear kept throwing a tantrum in the corridor but then she suddenly frowned and brought her face near the wet floor of the corridor as though she were staring at something.

"Wait a minute...? It's really weird for this kind of place to be soaking wet. It feels like... Just now... I recall hearing the name of something. Whatchamacallit? Wet... Wet... Wet—Ah!"

"W-What is it?"

"The wet woman! Didn't Zenon mention about the 'wet woman youkai' just now!? I can't believe it really exists!"

Haruaki surrendered. To think he actually expected her to say anything decently serious.

"Say, Fear... Whether it's the wet woman's fault or any other, we're currently looking for the mascot costume thief, right!? Let's leave the youkai for youkai hunters or survivors of ghostly tribes to handle. We should hurry and get going!"

"What are you talking about? Being weird and monstrous is what it means to be a youkai! Although he's a mysterious thief of mascot costumes, he's also a mysterious freak with a sweat fetish and a bizarre madman to boot! Madmen are always involved in crazy things, so this is definitely a clue... Muu! Haruaki, look, it's wet over here as well! Looks like the trail leads up the stairs, let's give chase!"

"Hey! Wait a sec, Fear!"

Fear ignored Haruaki and rushed up the stairs on the side. Since they were currently on the fourth floor, this staircase led to the roof.

Left with no choice, they could only chase after Fear. The stairs were also wet. Water was left on the stairs in intervals corresponding to footsteps. In any case, there probably was no youkai, but the scene confronting them was indeed quite strange.

"Uwah!"

"Are you alright? Rushing too fast is very dangerous... Or rather, since there's nothing up here, there's no need to rush."

"Right. I'm sorry to tell you this, Fear-kun, but I remember that the door to the roof is supposed to be locked for today."

"Really? After all, it would be quite dangerous if young children could go up there on their own."

Reaching the end of the staircase, Fear stood motionlessly in front of the door leading to the roof.

However, her reason for standing there was completely different from what was expected.

"Someone broke the lock."

"What did you say?"

Fear was right, the door handle was completely destroyed.

The whole group held their breath nervously and the surrounding atmosphere grew tense imperceptibly.

"This means someone forced their way up to the roof, although who knows why they were so desperate they had to break the lock."

"Judging from the wetness of these stains... This happened not too long ago. Assuming that the lock breaker and the person dripping with water are one and the same."

"So, do we need to consider the possibility that the person is still on the roof...?"

"Let's be careful, everyone."

Konoha narrowed her eyes and said:

"—Let's open the door now."

After a quick glance at everyone's face, Fear forcefully kicked the door open. Having lost its lock, the door opened with a metallic grating sound. Shining into their eyes, the glaring sunlight came from the vast and open sky. While enduring the dazzling sunlight, they looked around on the roof. However, the empty space was completely deserted without any moving creature at all.

"Not here huh... Hmm, that's...?"

Fear discovered something and ran over to the edge of the roof, bending over in front of the fencing. Haruaki caught up to her and checked out the sight from behind her silver hair.

Indeed, there was a patch of wet concrete. Due to the abundance of sunlight, the water had almost completely evaporated. But there was no mistake. Upon close examination, there were what appeared to be vague footprints leading from the roof entrance to the edge here.

"Indeed there's no mistake. The person probably walked from over there. Judging from the amount of water, that person stood here for quite a while—"

Haruaki abruptly stopped speaking because he was struck by a terrifying feeling. Then what? Did the person suddenly vanish from this spot? Or perhaps, went over the fencing and jumped down? But both were impossible.

"Then what on earth happened? Why does this feel more and more like a supernatural tale?"

"Th-That's too scary. I'd rather that sort of thing only happen to that doll with the extensible hair at home."

"In any case, let's first check out the situation downstairs. If that person didn't vanish, then that only leaves crossing over this fencing... I only hope that we won't see something that we don't want to see."

Kirika was right. After taking a nervous gulp, the members of the group approached the fence on their own. Then right at the instant they slowly peered down—

Haruaki was the first to hear the noise.

"Who is it!?" "Who's there!?"

Konoha and Fear turned around simultaneously and shouted ferociously, then—

"What... This is—?"

Kirika's voice expressed doubt and shock as something metallic was fastened tightly around her neck.

Finally realizing the irregularity of the situation, Haruaki turned around for a look.

Without them noticing, two people had started standing behind them.

"Completely unguarded... Is there something really fun over there...? Anyway, thank you for your efforts, Un Izoey."

"My feeling: delighted more or less. The honor of your praise is my glory."

The first to speak was a man standing leisurely not too far away. Answering him in awkward Japanese was the person who leapt back to his side—namely, the girl who had secretly crept up behind Haruaki's group just now.

The girl seemed to be the same age as Haruaki's group. Dark-skinned. Her gray hair, almost white in color, was cut suitably in a short hairstyle. Beneath her hair were dense eyebrows displaying great willpower as well as completely emotionless eyes.

Her attire was quite avant-garde. Using a piece of cloth whose design seemed rather tribal, her lower body was wrapped in the manner of a long skirt. Exposed beneath the hem was a pair of dark-skinned legs that seemed as strong as a wild beast's. On her upper body, she was wearing something like a white coat but one could hardly be certain. Even though all the buttons were fastened, did any white coat existing in this world deliberately exhibit a person's navel and sturdy abs? Above the triangular patch of exposed, dark-colored skin, there were exquisite curves of voluptuousness, clearly pushed up by the skin-tight fabric—How should one describe it? But most certainly, it was already close to winter yet the girl's upper body was wearing nothing except for this kind of white coat.



The girl was clearly suspicious but her attire was not the most pressing issue. Rather it was why would she secretly creep up behind them?

"Class Rep...!?"

"Guh... Yachi! Don't ever let your attention stray from these two people!"

"B-But Kirika—There's something on your neck!"

Just as Fear pointed out, a black object had been imposed on Kirika's neck. It resembled a large choker made of steel or perhaps something resembling a dog collar. Kirika frantically tried to take it off but the man before them stopped her with an intriguing voice.

"Careful. I would advise you not to do anything rash. You wouldn't think that is just be an ordinary collar, would you, Kirika?"

Kirika went "Guh!" and bit her lip. Despite her murderous stares, the man laughed nonchalantly.

Their conversation prompted Haruaki to ask a most natural question.

"Class Rep, do you know that guy?"

Narrowing her eyes in a vicious expression, Kirika glared straight ahead.

With great resentment—

She spoke the man's name.

"—His name is Yamimagari Pakuaki. He's my... absolute worst of an older brother."

Chapter 2 - Labor Festival / Where Is the Remedy for Loneliness? / "A collar that matches her well."

Part 1

He was a tall, slim man with hair as long as a woman's. The exquisite features of his handsome face displayed a natural and cordial smile—Only after hearing his name did Haruaki discover that he completely different from his vague preconceptions. Speaking of which, even though the girl who seemed to be his subordinate was dressed in a white lab coat, this man did not wear the same thing. Instead, what he had on was a black lab coat that resembled a trench coat. His pants were fastened to his legs with leather belts in the style of a rock and roll artist. In other words, in concert with the black lab coat, his attire was going for a musician's look. However, there was one inconsistent aspect in the impression displayed: the small notebook hanging on a string around his neck.

"Aren't you going a bit too far in calling me the absolute worst? Kirika... You break my heart so. To think we used to be so close. See, I still have the records here. Oh yeah, new guys, would you like to have a look as well? Once you see this, you'll understand that I have evidence to prove the veracity of what I said."

Next, the man—Pakuaki—took out a large photo album from a pocket in his black lab coat and started flipping through it. Indeed, it was taken out from his pocket. No matter how one thought about it, a photo album of that size could not possibly fit in a pocket.

In any case, now was not the time for pondering these trivialities. Preparing for combat, Konoha readied her knife hand while Fear grabbed her Rubik's cube, stepping up in front of Kirika as though protecting her. Although the man looked quite friendly, he was actually the leader of an organization that conducted research on cursed tools—The man who made Kirika put on that bondage suit. As shown by Kirika's attitude, he was not a person she wished to engage in peaceful conversation.

The cold and expressionless girl—the one called Un Izoey—drew closer to Pakuaki as though she were reacting to Fear and Konoha's actions. She was most likely in charge of Pakuaki's safety.

"You don't want to have a look? What a shame. I believe that Kirika playing in an inflatable pool would be quite a rare sight."

Shrugging, Pakuaki stuffed the photo album back in his pocket.

"This man is really annoying. I don't like him."

"I should apologize to Ueno-san for my tactlessness, but I agree with that assessment."

"...Class Rep, are you okay?"

Haruaki suddenly found Kirika acting not too well. She was trembling nonstop, clutching her shoulders and shrinking her body. Nevertheless, she resolutely looked up and said:

"This—collar, what is the meaning of this!? Pakuaki!"

"You're asking why? Of course it's punishment. So just keep wearing it for now. For someone like you who's afraid of loneliness, it should be unbearable already, right? It's important that you understand a little that you're actually not as strong as you think you are."

Perhaps a habit or part of his inborn personality, Pakuaki kept chattering away casually.

"You're calling this... punishment...? What did Kirika do wrong!?"

"How odd~? That should be something you should be perfectly aware of, Fear-in-Cube? She has committed two grave mistakes. First of all, Kirika caused my subordinate... her partner to suffer injuries. Poor him, still hospitalized to this date... Although the deadly weapon used was a moving vehicle, the little sister sitting in the front passenger seat is also a deadly weapon. Then the second one is—Oh~ Excuse me, may I take this chance to renourish myself a little?"

Saying that, Pakuaki took out a yellow box from his pocket. Anyone could easily tell it was a packet of CalorieMate from the appearance. Stuffing the biscuit into his mouth and chewing, he continued:

"Yes, this biscuit remains eternally tasty. I simply adore this assorted fruit flavor. Apart from tasting like I'm eating an assortment of fruit, the awesome thing is that it doesn't have any detrimental effects on health. Furthermore, this packet only contains 400 calories. With a total of four biscuits inside, this means that each biscuit only has 100 calories. Don't you find this distribution amazing? Personally, I love easy-to-remember numbers. It's truly perfect."

"You keep prattling on things we didn't ask... Stop screwing around!"

"Oh right, we were talking about the second reason, yeah? Summed up in a single phrase—The Bivorio Family."

Haruaki's group held their breath. This was because, for the past month, they had been involved in various matter related to the organization of that name.

"Kirika, you supposedly said the following to Alice Bivorio Basskreigh, isn't that right? 'Fear-in-Cube is already cooperating with the Lab Chief's Nation, so if you dare make a move on these people, be prepared to make enemies of the entire Lab Chief's Nation'—You said this and used your identity for additional persuasiveness. But what you probably don't know is what happened afterwards as a result?"

Kirika frowned slightly and asked in return with displeasure:

"What actually... happened?"

"...That was clearly something that you engineered and yet you didn't consider the consequences? How troubling, this is truly shameful for a researcher. Please do not underestimate the value of running simulations beforehand—Anyay, I'll keep it simple. Despite your threats, Bivorio still made a move on Fear-in-Cube. They made their move, fully believing your lie that you are backed by the Lab Chief's Nation. Do you understand what that means?"

"What are... you saying? I... don't understand..."

Kirika's eyes of doubt drifted towards Haruaki and company.

"S-Sorry, Class Rep. There was a situation during the sports festival. Because you were busy with many things at the time and also due to the suddenness of it all, we never found the opportunity to inform you."

"Because it was an incident that ended within roughly the span of a day, Kirika, I have no intention of disrespecting you. If you have any complaints, go ahead and tell them to Cow Tits."

"Eh... It's not like that, umm... My apologies. It's just that the situation naturally developed that way. Ultimately, Fear-san ended up safe and sound."

"But Tateoka Aiko died."

Pakuaki spoke in a relaxed tone of voice. The instant Haruaki heard him, a surge of anger exploded in his heart and rushed up to his brain. Fear felt the same way.

"Shut up! That girl—That girl... isn't dead at all! Besides, how would you know!? You... You... Depraved voyeur!"

"Oh dear, looks like the conversation got derailed, let's get back on topic. The result was that the Bivorio Family had already prepared themselves to go to war with us. That was why they planned on using Tateoka Aiko's gu poison to bolster their combat strength all at once. No, let me adjust the order of presentation. Speaking of why they sought great combat strength, the answer is simple—The Family intended to make a preemptive strike to secure victory. As soon as the Matriarch decided to go to war, they attacked us with suicide bombers."

Suicide bombers—This was normally a term only seen on the news, right? Did that really happen? Right here in Japan?

But somewhere in Haruaki's mind, the notion that "perhaps it really did happen" surfaced.

Because Haruaki's group understood very well the extent of that organization's fanaticism. They understood the ugly truth that the members of the Family were originally willing to die simply for the sake of expressing the Bivorio Family's position in a dramatic manner. They understood the ugly truth that the Family intended to murder all the people inside the school simply for the sake of creating gu poison.

"Even powerless members could cause us substantial losses through suicide bombing attacks. As for the Family members who are actually capable of fighting, some would rampage a while before detonating themselves while a fair number of them rampaged too much and were subdued before they could detonate... Hmm?"

An electronic tone was heard from Pakuaki's pocket at this moment. A cellphone ringtone.

"Hey, how could you still find time to pick up a call!? Our conversation isn't over yet!"

"I'll finish immediately, excuse me... Hmm, it's me. What?"

"Yeah, I know." Answering the caller rather casually, Pakuaki ended the call in a matter of ten-odd seconds. As Un Izoey stared at him from the side, he returned her gaze and remarked helplessly:

"This is what they call 'speaking of the devil,' isn't it? The chief of Branch 17 just called to say that the former captive, Oratorie Rabdulmunagh, has gone missing. This report comes a little too late, seriously."

"My feeling: surprise, at their laziness and embarrassment."

"You make a good point, how did that woman escape...? In any case, it's completely irrelevant to our current purpose, so let's forget about it. Well then—Say, Kirika, could you stop trembling and listen carefully to what I'm saying?"

"I-I'm not... trembling, okay?"

She was clearly lying because Kirika was still hugging her shoulders. Although she had not suffered any injuries, her reaction from just a collar on her neck implied a definite problem.

"How stubborn you are. In the end, due to your lie, the Lab Chief's Nation suffered extremely severe losses. This is why I need to punish you. Also due to that reason—I have no choice but to say this. In other words..."

At this moment, his friendly smile vanished.

Resentfully, he spat out his words:

"—Don't get too full of yourself, Kirika."

Kirika's shoulders trembled as though she were a frightened child.

"That's right, you're too full of yourself. I've always tolerated your willfulness in the past, but my patience has finally run out—I came here for a very simple purpose, namely, to take you back."

Despite the shock from hearing those words, Haruaki and his companions continued to wait.

Waiting for Kirika to answer, who desperately tried to squeeze her voice out despite her trembling.

"...Wanna."

"Hmm?"

"...I don't... wanna...!"

She expressed clear refusal. The instant they heard her answer, Haruaki's group decided what they had to do.

Haruaki entered a stance, Konoha chopped the air with her hand while Fear clutched the Rubik's cube tightly. Then Kirika mustered all her strength and repeated those words again. Straightening her curled back, she said:

"—I don't wanna! As if anyone would want to return to your place! Absolutely ridiculous!"

"I knew you'd say that. But that's precisely why I did this."

Pakuaki slapped his own neck audibly. Realizing his intent, Kirika reached for her neck in comprehension—towards the collar that wrapped around her neck.

"Why do you wish to stay here, Kirika? Is this school really such a comfortable place? I was thinking, since you regard this place as your support, perhaps I should do something to make that support worthless?"

"What are you talking about? What's the meaning of Kirika's collar, hurry and tell me!"

Fear turned the Rubik's cube into the drill and threatened. However, the only one who moved was Un Izoey who took half a step forward. Remaining relaxed, Pakuaki said:

"Well then, where should I start explaining...? That collar is something I made out of a cursed brooch. Apart from being used as punishment, it also serves an indispensable role in my purpose. Since hints are in order, here's some info on the collar—Number one, the person wearing the collar will experience intense feelings of isolation. Number two, the collar can only be opened with a special key."

Feelings of isolation, in other words... Loneliness? This was most likely the reason why Kirika's attitude had changed from earlier. The fact that it did not threaten her life could probably be considered good news amidst misfortune—

On the other hand, Fear scoffed at Pakuaki's explanation.

"Hmph, it even comes with a key? That's really a lot of effort you put into it. But given that kind of rubbish collar, just the use of my drill or Cow Tit's blade will easily..."

"—Number three, if you try to disassemble or break the collar by force, it will set off a small bomb that's installed inside. The blast should be powerful enough to blow off her head completely? In fact, virtually all of the collar's volume is occupied by explosives."

"What...!"

Kirika swiftly backed away.

"Hurry and leave, Yachi. Don't stay near me...!"

"Hey hey hey, I'm completely confident in its safety. Please believe me, okay? It won't blow up unless you attempt to get it off by force. I'll even bet you on that."

"How absolutely ridiculous and completely meaningless. How about I simply go somewhere far away from people and break it off? After all, it's just blowing my head off, that's really no problem at all."

"CI-Class Rep?"

Even if she does not die, there would still be a huge problem, right?

But Kirika's eyes made it perfectly clear that she was serious. If cornered without any options, she would surely resort to that. No matter who tried to stop her, she would not be dissuaded. That was the kind of resolve her eyes exhibited. Turning his head back and looking at Kirika's firm resolve, Pakuaki kept shaking his black lab coat as though he were very surprised.

"Indeed, I expected you were very likely to do that. Hence, here comes the main theme. I mean the main theme of the game."

"Game...?"

Kirika frowned in puzzlement.

"Indeed, it's a game. Does this look familiar?"

Pakuaki took out an object from his black lab coat. This was inconceivable given the object's size, but there was no time to ponder that. The problem was that the object really was familiar.

The plushie was big enough to hug with both arms and designed to look like a long-haired youth in chibi-proportions. Dressed in a black coat, the doll even had something resembling a notebook hanging on his neck on further examination—

"That's... I saw it before! Just now... At Shiraho's place..."

"Isn't this Pakuaki-kun doll super cute? I asked Un Izoey to secretly leave them all around the school. They're all placed in conspicuous places you can find just by paying a little attention. Including this one, there are fifty of them in total. Because this number is easy to remember... So, one of them is the target doll. All you need to do is twist its head off—Hmm, this feels kind of bad even though it's just a doll, but never mind. Anyway, among those dolls, one of them is the target carrying the key to Kirika's collar while containing a bomb like the one installed on the collar."

"You—What did you say?"

"Of course, I have carefully considered the issue of safety. So long as you don't light it up on fire directly, it won't explode whether moved from place to place or thrown around. Two conditions can trigger detonation. One is if Kirika's collar explodes. This design is so that if she attempts to take off the collar, it results in a chain reaction that causes the doll to explode. The second condition is a time limit. I've set the timer to... 5pm today, exactly when the cultural festival ends. When some innocent student comes along, obliged to clean up the place, discovers this abandoned object and thinking to him or herself "How troublesome~", he or she picks up the target doll—"

In a humorous tone of voice, Pakuaki made "kaboom" sound effects and threw the doll behind him.

Haruaki could not help but shudder in terror at the thought of that scene. Instantly, he converted those emotions into wrath—Stop screwing around! However, he did not speak out but simply thought in his mind. Stop screwing around!

On the other hand, the girls faction was more used to expressing their anger. All their faces displayed alarm:

"H-How absolutely ridiculous!"

"You bastard—How dare you do such a thing!?"

"That's no different from using the innocent students as hostages! Stop this right now!"

"I've said it many times, this is just a game. I'm not the devil. I also wish to avoid innocent children losing their lives over this. That's why I won't hinder you from looking for the target doll... Oh right, if you use the school's public announcement or similar means to evacuate the students, that's cheating and against the rules. That would be equivalent to knocking over my specially prepared game board and I'll have to detonate an explosion at a certain location as the penalty."

Pakuaki explained nonchalantly and even winked clumsily at Kirika.

"Actually, there are also safety measures in place. If you want to end this incident peacefully, Kirika, you should know what to do? Just call my cellphone—if you've already erased my cellphone number long ago, going through other researchers is fine too—just contact me before the time limit. If a student is hurt by a detonated bomb, surely you cannot stay at this school anymore? That's what I meant earlier when I said I'll render worthless this comfortable place that serves as your support."

"Absolutely ridiculous... Good heavens, how absolutely ridiculous! If you're going to make me play such a depraved game, why don't you simply take me away using brute force!? Just kill me and take me away while I'm reviving. Isn't that much simpler?"

"Don't be silly, how could I possibly do something like killing my cute little sister?"

Kirika was gritting her teeth in fury, to the point that it was audible. On the other hand, Pakuaki continued in a relaxed tone of voice:

"I hope you can understand how considerate I am. Like this game, for instance—Basically, if you must stay in this school no matter what, there is a way for you not to go back with me, so long as you exhibit resolve in full desperation. Coming from me, this counts as a difficult compromise between my standpoints as your brother and the Lab Chief."

Perhaps unable to tolerate Pakuaki's despicable behavior, Fear suddenly rushed at him in that instant. Charging forward with the drill—However, what stopped Fear turned out unbelievably to be accompanied by a flash of light moving up and a sharp metallic noise at the same time.

The dark-skinned girl had suddenly equipped herself with two accessories.

A pair of handcuffs and a knife.

Those were handcuffs beyond a doubt, securing her dark-skinned hands together in front of her. The knife was definitely an ordinary knife, but instead of being in her hand, she was holding it with her right foot. No one could understand why she was wearing handcuffs but using her foot to wield the knife. More importantly, it was incomprehensible why she had to put on handcuffs.

Holding the knife between the toes of her right foot, she was standing nimbly on one leg. Despite the weirdness of her appearance, it was obvious that she did not do this out of pretense or some peculiar habit—because the way she brandished the knife was even more agile than held in the hand, resulting in the deflection of Fear's drill. As a side note, her left foot was also bare except for something resembling a thread, wrapped around her big toe for some unknown reason.

"W-What... Damn it, you weird girl...!"

"She is quite weird indeed, but clearly an opponent that cannot be underestimated... Her martial arts seem to be specially honed in this area."

Fear lifted up her torture tool again and Konoha tensed all the nerves in her body. Seeing their reaction, Un Izoey narrowed her eyes into a straight line. Slowly spreading her legs, she pushed her skirt slit far apart and gradually raised a dark-skinned thigh, meanwhile maintaining a knee-bent posture—Goodness knows how she acquired such an amazing sense of balance, her body did not wobble even once the entire time.

Feeling interested, Pakuaki watched Fear and Konoha face off against her as his shoulders shook with laughter:

"Well~ There's also one more reason why I'm not taking you back by force, Kirika, and that's because you have a group of reliable friends like these. In my personal opinion, no matter how amazing this child is, it's still difficult for her to overcome the numerical disadvantage... Furthermore, I'm not too used to combat either. Yes yes, you're all meeting for the first time, right? As a matter of principle, greetings are in order."

Making a slightly surprised look, the girl then sighed lightly and shook her gray hair as she spoke:

"My name: Un Izoey. Meaning in my tribe: cloud and knowledge."

"She's African. Please let her strange Japanese bother you... By the way, although I said don't get bothered, you all must be feeling intrigued by something else, right? Those handcuffs are just part of their tribal customs apparently."

"The hands: sacred gifts bestowed by the great sacred spirit, hence forbidden: defiling by the blood of enemies."

"Well well~ In other words, her tribe forbids using their hands to attack their enemies directly. A taboo that entails either suicide or eternal exile from the tribe. Isn't this child interesting?"

"I don't care about interesting or not...! Hurry up, tell us where the bomb and the key are!"

"Hahaha! If I say it out, then what's the point of the game? Well then, Un Izoey, prepare to leave. I'm returning to the Lab Chief's room, so take care of this."

"Affirmative."

What happened next was also incomprehensible. Just as Pakuaki stared into Un Izoey's chest—at the pocket of her lab coat—He vanished in an instant, leaving the girl standing there alone.

"What on earth is this—Damn it, the conversation's not over! Anyway, asking you is the same, tell me where the bomb and the key are! If you won't, I'll force you even if it means using force!"

Drawing in close, Fear made a thrust with the drill again. Un Izoey instantly lowered her body. Using her cuffed hands to perform a cartwheel on the roof—raising her right leg in the process—she used the knife held between her toes to deftly deflect Fear's drill. Her use of her hands and feet were completely reversed. As soon as she landed, she kicked with her left leg. Although she only swept past Fear's skirt, Un Izoey used the gap in timing to raise her right foot with the knife in a bizarre trajectory, forcing Fear to back off hastily.

Next, it was Konoha's turn to chop with her hand. Getting up, the girl stood on one leg unnaturally, raising the knife-wielding right foot to an outrageous height and blocking the attack gracefully. The dark-skinned leg moved about in unpredictable angles, swiveling, rising, falling.

"Good grief~ What kind of moves are these? They're so difficult to handle...!"

"Take this——!"

Fear threw the wheel of torture from the side. Un Izoey lowered her stance again and used her hands like feet to jump—Leaping towards the fencing, she grabbed the top part of the fence while upside down, her icy cold gaze directed towards Fear. The girl bent her left leg and straightened her body as though restraining her knife-wielding right leg. Then she leaned back and slowly fell towards the empty space behind her—

"—Excuse me, I take my leave now."

"Hey, hold it right there!"

The girl ignored Fear and disappeared on her own under the school building. Given her amazing martial arts, she probably had a way to land safely, right? The group hurried over to the edge and gazed down between the gaps in the fencing, but there were no signs of anyone below. An empty space behind the school building.

"She ran away? Damn it..."

"I really want to chase her down—But we've got more pressing matters to handle."

"I hate agreeing with Cow Tits, but she's right. Kirika, how are you feeling?"

"...Class Rep?"

"Mmm... Hmm? Ah... Hmm, sorry, what did you say?"

Rooted on the spot with a hollow gaze, Kirika was startled and turned to face them.

"Try to pull yourself together. What I mean is, regarding that guy's game, what are your thoughts?"

"...He's probably not bluffing? He's the type of man who loves playing malicious pranks. If he says the key and the bomb are among the fifty dolls, it's probably true."

"Seriously come on..."

"Whether this collar or the bomb in the doll, I don't think they're fake. Annoyingly, that girl's skills are no joke at all. Perhaps it's just as that guy said, the bombs won't explode so easily... Probably."

"But the problem is there's still a time limit! Also, I'm not doubting your opinion, but just in case, right? It's still impossible to be completely at ease. If it really explodes, then truly... truly—The situation would become unsalvageable."

"That's for sure, so we must find the bomb as quickly as possible... I feel bad for that girl back there, but now is not the time to be looking for a mascot costume thief."

"Yeah, it can't be helped. Anyway, meting out divine retribution to a freak must be postponed for now."

Speaking of which, they were originally taking action as a group to resolve the theft incident, but clearly the latest problem had a time limit and even involved a bomb—There was a clear difference in danger level and the priority was obvious.

"It happens to be noon right now so, so there are roughly five hours remaining. We need to find the target doll within these five hours."

As Kirika spoke while looking at her cellphone, everyone nodded in response. As a matter of principle, they also retrieved the doll that Pakuaki had just discarded. And just to avoid missing the obvious, they even searched the roof thoroughly before returning inside the school building.

"Okay, this place seems to be clear. Let's go!"

Just as they were about to follow Fear and continue, Haruaki suddenly felt someone tugging him.

It was Kirika. She had stopped walking with her head slightly bowed and was even tugging Haruaki's uniform lightly.

"Class Rep, what's the matter with you?"

Haruaki's question prompted Kirika to suddenly let go as though she finally realized what she was doing. Frantically, she raised her hand in front of her face and waved it.

"..Ah! N-Nothing, umm, don't get the wrong idea, nothing's the matter with me."

"I really hope it's nothing..."

Haruaki was just about to start walking again but found his shirt hem being tugged again. When he looked back, Kirika frantically released her grip. This time, she was pursing her lips as though in anger, then she quickly walked in front of Haruaki—But just as she passed him from the side, Haruaki saw that her face was all red for some reason.

Haruaki figured as much. Recalling what Pakuaki had said, he sighed.

Sigh, what a whole load of issues.

Only just a little while ago, this had been a very ordinary cultural festival, why did it evolve into this—

Just at this moment, he suddenly recalled what Fear had said just a while earlier. 'The cultural festival... with all sorts of random things and no idea who is doing what, it's hard to describe in a single sentence... After all, it's just chaos followed by chaos, that's what's called a cultural festival!'

"...You were right, Fear."

Haruaki simply muttered his words then sighed long and deep.

In terms of the degree of chaos, there was probably nothing more true to the essence of a cultural festival than the current situation, right?

Naturally—Should cultural festival-like situations arise again, it would be best to avoid chaotic circumstances like this with enemies and bombs causing all sorts of trouble.

Haruaki's group called Zenon for help in various areas as they descended from the roof to the fourth floor. But during that short period of time, the problem had clearly worsened.

"Guh... Huff... Ahh... Huff~..."

"H-How are you, Kirika?"

"Does it hurt somewhere...? If that's the case, please don't push yourself too much, Ueno-san!"

"N-No, I'm fine. I'm really... fine... Ahhh, damn it..."

"Uhhh~ Why are you glaring at me, Class Rep...?"

Kirika seemed to be enduring something, her breathing was very frequent and she was curling up her body like a kitten and trembling nonstop. Speaking of her symptoms, it was reminiscent of what had happened before the sports festival. But her feverish-looking gaze looked quite different from last time. Also, her eyes were alternating between unsteady gazes as though she were about to burst into tears and resolved gazes whenever she was suddenly startled by self-awareness of the former. However, the latter was progressively getting rarer. Furthermore, her "ooh... oooh" moaning seemed to be getting more and more frequent.

This corridor on the fourth floor did not seem to have any popular shops, hence there were not a lot of students around. However, it was not deserted either. If Haruaki's group stopped here, it would only attract people's attention.

"Class Rep, I think we should first go somewhere inconspicuous. The way you are right now, it's impossible to search for the dolls. Come, since you're unable to lead the way, why don't you walk with your hand on my shoulder?"

Just as Haruaki approached Kirika, she grabbed him by the collar of his uniform.

"A-Ahhh... Damn it, I can't stand this anymore! Ahhh~ Jeez, why... Why did this happen—C-Come over here!"

"Class Rep, please don't pull... But isn't that place kind of bad? Hey, wait a sec—!"

Haruaki was instantly dragged into somewhere "inconspicuous." Indeed, he had suggested they go somewhere inconspicuous, but this was far too unexpected. He never would have predicted this to happen.

Because this was the girls' washroom.

"Nwah—! What are you doing, shameless brat! Did you finally decide to use your talent for shamelessness? I'll curse you!"

"Please remain sane—! Haruaki-kun, you're not that kind of person!"

"You're both mistaken, this isn't my intention! Class Rep, Class Rep, please don't do this!"

However, Kirika did not listen to him at all. Haruaki was forcibly dragged by her all the way into the place where boys were absolutely forbidden.

Fortunately, no one was inside and all the stalls were vacant. Fortunately... No, simply being here was not good at all. Just as Haruaki was overcome with a sense of turmoil—Kirika proceeded to charge at Haruaki, pushing him into one of the stalls.

"Hold on, Kirika! Pull yourself together!"

"P-Please don't lose your sanity, Ueno-san!"

In order to stop Kirika, Fear and Konoha also entered the stall, but this resulted in a worse situation. Then came voices and footsteps of female students. "Ahahah—Really, you don't say? Ah, could you accompany me for a quick trip to the washroom? I wanna reapply my lip gloss." "Sure."

"Hmm..."

With no other option in sight, Haruaki managed with great difficulty to close the stall's door with his foot. Konoha then reached behind her and turned the lock shut—Indeed, they could only wait inside until the crisis passed.

Even more fortunate was the fact that the girls stopped in front of the mirror and showed no intention of entering the stalls.

Haruaki almost breathed a sigh of relief but he changed his mind. It was not a situation where he could relax yet, because there were four people squeezed in a cramped washroom stall.

"Class Rep, Class Rep, could you stop that....!"

"Mmm... Huff... Ooh..."

Kirika was still grabbing tightly onto Haruaki. She repeatedly took deep breaths mixed with moans, desperately trying to control her body that kept shuddering nonstop. The way she looked, it was almost as though she were a lost child, holding tightly to a parent after a harrowing search.

Looking at the shiny object on her neck, Haruaki recalled Pakuaki's explanation.

The collar caused the wearer to experience intense feelings of isolation.

That was why she became like this, right? That was why she acted unwell from a while ago, right? Furthermore, there was a fragrance coming from Kirika's hair... No, not allowed to think about that! Forbidden!

Haruaki suddenly recovered his sanity and reconfirmed the current situation. Nevertheless, it was enough to break out in cold sweat. Due to being grabbed tightly by Kirika and the presence of the other two girls packed into this narrow stall, their bodies had no choice but to be pressed tightly against one another. Konoha, whose facial muscles kept twitching as she watched Kirika and Haruaki, was providing sensations of softness, warmth and volume. On the other hand, Fear was making an expression as scary as an evil demon's while pulling Haruaki's hair without saying a word. Ouch. She was supporting herself with one foot on the toilet seat. In other words, her thigh was pushing hard against him—

Kirika's body kept pressing tightly against him, Konoha's bosom felt so soft, so very soft, whereas Fear's thigh kept pushing. Everyone was packed together, pressed together, squeezed together, shoved together...

(What on earth is this situation? W-What on earth should I do...?)

What kind of awkward predicament was this, or perhaps even a fatal situation? Clearly there was a whole mountain of issues to handle and they had to start the doll search as quickly as possible... Just at this moment, Haruaki discovered something.

Feeling something against the back of his head, he looked back to find the doll on top the toilet's water tank. For an instant, he could not comprehend when the doll was placed there, combined with the fact that the doll used for the explanation on the roof was firmly in their possession. Consequently, this doll must have been placed here all along—

"..."

Hence, under circumstances that were hardly rejoicing, the second doll was found. Without undergoing examination, it was impossible to tell if this was the target doll, but at any rate, this was the first actual discovery of a doll that was placed by the other side. Logically speaking, this should be one of those times for yelling "Great, we've made progress!" to consolidate team morale or perhaps encouragement along the lines of "Everyone, let's continue trying our best along this pace!" However—

Haruaki got the feeling that Fear would probably shove her Rubik's cube against his face while saying "You still haven't understood the situation? If you don't stop this shameless behavior, I'm going to make full use of this!"

—However, the unity of our team spirit was on the verge of collapse. What on earth should I do?

Part 2

So fucking hot.

Due to the airtight mascot costume—How many times was it already?—Kururi sighed as she walked amidst the lively bustle of the cultural festival. She did not find herself particularly conspicuous and the chaotic surroundings easily accepted her attire.

Students moving about; people walking as they yelled out to sell boxes of yakisoba fried noodles; photographers with "Photography Club, Recording Personnel" armbands; fellow mascots in cat costumes, passing flyers out; a female teacher in a tracksuit, carrying a shovel on her shoulder for some reason; young men in casual clothing, trying relentlessly to chat up girls; and finally—an elementary school girl on her parent's shoulder, happily wandering amongst the cultural festival's stalls, a parent and child pair. Parent and child—

In that instant, Kururi began to imagine the faces of her father and sister. Their faces as they fell down the cliff before her eyes as well as the sound of impact coming from far below.

Then she imagined her mother's face, an upside down face. The face of her mother, singing praises to the end of her life, falling downwards, grabbing onto the middle of the cliff, clicking her tongue at Kururi—And then, the sound that only Kururi found delightful...

Crash!

Kururi dispelled the nonexistent sound and continued to walk, walking in this high school, a space she had never experienced before.

It was crowded but not to the extent where people would bump shoulders. There were high school girls, chatting up a storm while looking this way and that, as well as humanoid mascots who stumbled perhaps due to poor visibility. Even if they were to make any unexpected moves, they would not be able to touch even a finger of hers. For Kururi who paid greater attention to the distance of a single millimeter than anyone else in this world—The hundreds of millimeters separating them were truly vast.

Naturally, this also applied to the woman walking beside her in a parka. The pair maintained their separation at roughly 740mm. Naturally, this was in perfect accordance with her wishes. Since both sides neither needed

nor wanted contact with each other—whether in terms of physical or nonphysical separation.

Indeed, although there was a need to act together, Kururi wanted to stay as far away as possible from this woman, a member of the Family. She did not want to gaze upon that existence. Simply the awareness of this woman's existence beside her was enough to cause an unpleasant feeling surging in Kururi's heart.

Resembling shame, resembling pain, resembling resentment, resembling fear—A chaotic and unpleasant feeling that even Kururi herself could not explain clearly.

Hence, there was no need to talk to her unless necessary. But if she tried to start a conversation, Kururi could not ignore her.

"So far the result is we still haven't found our targets..."

"How could it possibly be that easy? I found him once earlier, but it was only by chance."

"There's really too many people. Such a pain."

Beneath the mask, Kururi smiled. If you're in that much of a rush to find your target, why don't you simply kill these students off, one by one? Once the situation escalated, your target will very likely come running—These half-joking suggestions entered Kururi's mind, but of course, she did not actually voice them out.

Because if she were to do so, the woman would probably do it.

Kururi understood very well.

She knew that the nature of this woman and the Family as an organization.

"How about a change of topic, do you have a Wathe too?"

Kururi answered "No." That kukri knife was no longer in her possession. Feeling that such a simple answer might not be enough, Kururi supplemented it with a nauseatingly disgusting lie.

"That's why I can only act as something like a helper, and cowardly too."

"Don't let that bother you. Or rather, I don't think it would bother the Matriarch. I think I remember some of us don't have Wathes."

"...Yours is that one, right? Called the «Tragedy Method», isn't it?"

Kururi deliberately changed the subject. The woman lightly waved the thing on her shoulder.

"Indeed, indeed. It's my savior."

The Family was more or less a gathering place for people like her. A group of people who were saved by cursed tools and then veered off the right track. Incurably reliant on cursed tools, these people had turned that reliance into the word "love" and branded it deeply in their minds.

Hence, Kururi wondered, were these women actually saved? Did they really not lose something?

She gulped but attempted to ask in a surreptitious manner.

"Say... Have you discovered that you had forgotten something?"

"Hmm? Ah, that's right. I almost forgot."

Kururi jumped in fright but the woman's answer was completely not what she expected.

"Wait for me a moment. I need to do a refill."

The woman walked towards the water faucet in the middle of the corridor and turned it. What she proceeded to do was an act to satisfy her curse. Behind the mask, Kururi frowned as she watched.

Ahhh, how weird.

Wathe, Wathe, Wathe. In principle, apart from Wathes, there was nothing else worth caring about. That was this woman's mode of thinking and the Family's mode of thinking.

If like Kururi, this woman had forgotten something—forced to forget something—then surely she should have recovered her memories already. However, she seemed completely aware of this. In that case, there was only one answer.

This woman was completely insane already.

Made insane by the cursed tool and the Family's mission of love—

Watching this woman was like observing her past self.

And the fact of her former insanity was once again branded upon the depths of her heart.

Kururi understood very well—Hence, that was why she acted this way.

That was why she stayed with this woman whom she disliked. That was why she felt a sense of revulsion she could not dispel no matter how hard she tried to convince herself that "this was necessary for completing her goal."

"Sorry for the wait—Let's go."

Returning from the water faucet, the woman continued forward once more. Kururi pondered again as they walked.

Regarding her past self as well as this woman who presented an image of her past self, Kururi pondered once again.

How disgusting.

Part 3

Getting out of the washroom predicament was admittedly a good thing, but the situation did not improve as much as hoped. Kirika was still holding Haruaki's hand that he kept behind him, which they finally decided to conceal by covering up with a towel. Then to prevent the towel from being seen by bystanders, Fear and Konoha walked while sandwiching Haruaki between them.

"S-Sorry, Yachi. I'm really sorry about this."

"Ah—Well~ This can't be helped! It's not your fault, Class Rep, just blame the collar!"

"Even so, what should I do? This... is really too embarrassing..."

Blushing red completely, Kirika murmured with her head bowed. According to what Haruaki had heard from her explanations, Kirika was still suffering from intense feelings of solitude. The curse made her legs lose strength, caused her to feel a chill that compelled her to hug her own shoulders, and produced an illusion that made her feel as though her body would be torn apart by the pain of loneliness. But for some unknown reason, her symptoms would subside whenever she touched other people, especially Haruaki.

"Very likely, the loneliness has its basis in abandonment. Consequently, it requires touching a member of the opposite sex in a tangible manner, that's probably it... I-It's not because you're particularly special, absolutely not. Hence... Ahhh~ Anyway, I'm very sorry for things to develop into such absolute ridiculousness..."

"Kirika, there's no need to apologize. A cursed tool is to blame, it can't be helped. But it must be tough for you, being forced to stick close to this shameless brat! You must be suffering a lot!"

"Uwah! Ouch ouch! Why are you hitting me!?"

Unable to control her short temper, Fear began to hammer Haruaki using the doll in her hand. Naturally, they had already examined the doll on sight to confirm that it neither held the key nor the bomb.

Meanwhile, from time to time, Konoha furtively glanced at the towel that concealed the sight of Kirika and Haruaki holding hands together.

"Hmm—It can't be helped, that's right, this cannot be helped. There's no need to feel wistful or envious. If I returned to my true nature, we can also touch legitimately all the time. Ahhh~ But holding hands like this is fun in its own way... If only I could wear the collar instead...!"

She kept muttering to herself. Although Haruaki could not quite understand her, luckily she did not seem like she would put her feelings to violent action like Fear.

"A-Anyway, please don't worry about me. After all, this is not life-threatening and the current situation does not give us the leisure to care about this. Yachi, have you contacted Hyoujou-san?"

"We contacted her already just now. She said she'll send someone to confirm the situation at the school gates. Also, she's willing to help us. Naturally, checking the school gates includes looking for Pakuaki and Un Izoey... Although I don't really think they'll show up. I also asked her to check if anyone takes the dolls out of school."

Finally tired of beating on Haruaki perhaps, Fear nodded with her silver hair swaying and said:

"But those guys probably won't leave normally through the school gates. At least, it's better than not looking out for them, however."

"Furthermore, we should gather all the dolls we find at the superintendent's office. It's better to keep an accurate count. She also said this should solve the problem of the bomb... Although it would require considerable skill."

"Also, she'll take responsibility for areas where we can't enter, such as the offices of teaching staff or preparation rooms. After all, it's possible that Pakuaki and Un Izoey are unscrupulous enough to place the dolls in locked or inaccessible locations."

When Kirika nodded and said "I see," Fear suddenly rushed forward hastily. The place she ran towards was the entrance to the haunted house. Beneath the desk that acted as the reception, the doll they discovered earlier was still there. Of course, Shiraho was no longer sitting there and under the suspicious gaze of the unfamiliar girl, Fear picked up the doll.

"Great, here's the third one. Okay, I'm gonna open it..."

However, it was empty inside. Four sighs overlapped together at once.

"Damn it, I knew it wouldn't be that easy to find..."

"Yachi, it's fortunate that we already knew this doll's location—But next, we need to find the dolls in unknown places. Shouldn't we split up and find them separately?"

Perhaps an unconscious gesture, Kirika spoke while gripping his hand hard.

"Yeah I know that... But with Ueno-san in this state..."

"We really can't let you act alone. Maybe it's better if Kirika goes with the shameless brat while the rest of us search independently... But without the two of us by your side, even with a towel covering your hands, you'll definitely draw unwanted attention. Umm, if you don't mind other people jumping to the wrong conclusions while you walk and hold hands like this, well, I won't mind at all either!"

Fear was angrily casting her gaze to the side for some unknown reason. Kirika frantically released her hand.

"We're not going to, okay, it will definitely cause problems! So, umm... Let's do it this way!"

Kirika stretched both arms forward against Haruaki's shoulders, resulting in a posture of pushing his back while they walked.

"Th-This should be better, more or less? This also alleviates the strange feelings produced by the collar as a result of contact with Yachi."

"This makes it look like I'm being taken somewhere unwillingly... Doesn't that make people misunderstand and think I've done something bad instead?"

"Th-Those are minor concerns!"

In the manner of a centipede race, Haruaki heard Kirika's voice from behind. However, this was much less embarrassing than holding hands together... Perhaps... Probably. Even so, it was still quite weird.

Fear and Konoha nodded lightly and exchanged glances, then sighed as if they gave up on something.

"Whatever, this can't be helped."

"And the confines of the school must be searched. Looks like splitting up is the only way."

"Very well, then let's decide on who's responsible for which areas and clear them thoroughly, one after another. Otherwise, searching the same places repeatedly would be a waste of time."

Then they swiftly assigned areas to one another and even made a few decisions. Even if the dolls discovered did not include the target doll, they should take the dolls with them. Once there were too many to carry, they would then deliver them to be kept in the superintendent's office. Finally, they decided on time allotment and to gather at the superintendent's office when the time arrived.

Now that all the necessary decisions were decided, what remained was actually taking action.

Looking at one another, expressed "Time for the real show to begin" and sharing their determination to find the target doll no matter what.

Then just as each person was setting off to their assigned area, Konoha and Fear looked back as though they had suddenly thought of something.

"Ah, Ueno-san! How should I put this, uh— ...P-Please take care! If anything should happen, I believe that even if you resorted to violence, it cannot be helped!"

"That's right! The shameless brat is very shameless, so who knows what kind of shameless act he might commit. For example, he might very well say 'Are you feeling lonely? What am I going to do with you...' then proceed to embrace you tightly... Then you shouldn't hesitate in that case and give him a good look at hell!"

"Understood. I'll handle things properly."

"Hey, you three, what kind of person do you take me for... Y-You're all kidding, right?"

Speaking with his eyes half-closed, Haruaki could see Fear and Konoha smiling. Although he could not see Kirika's face, somehow he got the feeling that she was making the same expression.

"Obviously... Just kidding."

"Indeed, because we all believe in your character."

"This is impossible, absolutely ridiculous."

For some reason, none of the three girls' voices sounded like they were laughing.

Part 4

This shameless brat! Damn the shameless brat...!

Fear did not quite understand why, but she felt completely enraged. Tasked with searching outside the school building for dolls, Fear entered the courtyard, walking in huge strides and cursing in her mind to take out her anger.

There were numerous tents lined up here, giving an impression quite similar to roadside stalls. Just as Kirika pointed out, open flames were apparently allowed here, hence this area was even more filled with appetizing aromas than inside the school building. At this moment, Fear was reminded that she had not eaten lunch yet.

Inquisitively, Fear swallowed her drooling saliva and started to search. No place should be left unchecked. The paths paved with red bricks, the benches made of unvarnished wood, behind the stalls... Of course, the interiors of the stalls needed to be investigated as well. Hearing a familiar voice crying out "Welcome—!", Fear entered a stall that was packed tight

with customers. Logically speaking, it should not be that easy to find one, but—

"...Eh, there really is one here!"

Placed on a long table, the doll was being used to prop up an advertising panel on which the words "Crepes specially prepared by the swimming club! A single bite is enough to take you across the Strait of Dover!" were written. One would expect a "Please do not touch" note somewhere... But judging from the situation, it either fell off or was lost.

In any case, Fear had found what she came to look for and she must take it with her.

"Oh? Isn't this Fear-chan? Welcome—!"

Fear looked up to find Kana standing before her. She was dressed in an apron with a bandanna, holding a small wooden ladle in her hand. The familiar voice that Fear had heard just now was probably Kana's.

"Now I remember, you're in the swimming club."

"That's right—Why did you come? For the crepes? I know~ You want to be able to cross the Strait of Dover as well?"

The aroma of the crepe pastry was making Fear's mouth water, but now was not the time for eating. Besides, she had not brought any money either.

"N-No. Actually, I have a request. This doll here, can I have it?"

"Eh?"

"Please, there's all sorts of reasons... But I must have it. Please, could you let me have it?"

"This thing huh? Without knowing when it was placed here, I simply used it on the spot to prop up the advertising panel. I guess it probably doesn't belong to anyone—But as a matter of courtesy, I should ask my club president."

Saying that, Kana turned around and walked inside the tent, her apron fluttering. Instantly, Fear stared in wide-eyed surprise.

Say, Kana, why are you dressed like that?

"Hmm? Yeah, actually, just find something else to support the panel... Wait a sec, it's that girl? The legendary super awesome silver-haired beauty in your class!? No way no way, let me amend my words. I absolutely cannot let slip this rare and perfect opportunity. As the club president, I order you, Miyama, please tell her this...!"

"Oh, I see I see. I get it now, I concur—!"

Kana instantly turned around towards Fear and deliberately cleared her throat, "cough cough," smiling as she spoke:

"The prez says no."

"W-What? That really makes things difficult, please, I beg you!"

"Ufufu—More precisely, you can't have it for free. Ah, but that doesn't mean we want money from you. What she proposes is that since you're here already, could you help our stall a little bit?"

"H-Help? I'm not really in a position to do that... because I have something urgent to do, there's not much time."

"Then you'll just have to make time somehow, thirty minutes! No, fifteen! Even ten would do! With your help, our stall's business will get even better!"

At this moment, a girl (probably the club president) emerged from the tent. Somehow, Fear found herself being the recipient of a request instead. Why?

However, Fear thought "Oh well, whatever" to herself and simply treated the request as the terms of exchange. Snatching by brute force should be a last resort only if pressed. But if a safer method were available, she should follow it. If it were really ten minutes only, it should not waste too much time—Perhaps it was fine to accept their condition.

"It can't be helped so I'll agree to it. But what do you need me to help? I don't know how to make crepes. Also, there's something that's been bugging me."

Fear half-narrowed her eyes at Kana's attire and asked her:

"—Why are you dressed in a swimsuit with an apron on top?"

At this moment, the club president reached out from beside the grinning Kana, her arms grabbing Fear's shoulders from across a table with an audible smack, an creepy smile on her face—

"That's because this is the swimming club."

"This—is—utterly—shameless—! Ooooooh—!"

"Come! We have taken another step towards the advent of our era, prez! Our crowd pulling powers are greatly increasing! But why would you have that kind of thing prepared?"

"I was going to have Tsukiori wear it, but that girl managed to run away... Fufufu, luckily, it didn't go to waste!"

"Ah—Because Tsukiori-senpai is a loli."

"Hey, you two! Why is my apron different from the rest of you!? The clothing used in combination is also weird!"

"That's a school swimsuit. I originally thought it might be too cliched, but tried and true classics are very important... Yes yes."

"Prez, I don't think this is actually the same as cliched. Rather, the combination with the dainty little apron is the main point. How should I put it? It's very original...!"

Listening to the two's dialogue, Fear was moaning "oooooh" in suffering in front of the tent. Embarrassing, too embarrassing. The apron was even smaller than the ones Kana and the others were wearing, completely unable to conceal the swimsuit that was made of thick, navy-blue fabric and even had a name tag sewn on the front... Somehow, it felt like there was some sort of special meaning to this.



"Hey, don't cover up your body with the panel! Up high, hold it up high! We're trying to promote here!"

"Do your best—Fear-chan—This is all for the sake of the doll—"

Hearing that, Fear looked towards the tent as though she had just woken from a dream. That's right, this was all for obtaining that doll.

As soon as she recalled her objective, the sense of embarrassment slowly weakened, but of course, it could not disappear completely.

Fear calmed her mind at this time, biting her lip hard. As much as she wanted to avoid thinking about it, she now had no choice but to focus her attention upon it, thinking about what might possibly happen. Right, the doll over there... The one not far away from Kana, what if it contained the bomb? What if it exploded? Kana, that club president, all the other members of the swimming club, as well as the customers whose numbers had increased, what would happen to them all?

Instantly, past images from her mind were superimposed with the future scenario she did not want to imagine. The man whose eyeballs fell into his mouth, the woman whose ribs were ripped open like a blooming flower, the girl whose arms and legs were twisted and deformed like a doll's, those scenes of gory flesh.

Could she allow such things to happen?

(How could I possibly allow that—Absolutely not!)

Once again, Fear carved in her mind what she needed to do and what she needed to do first.

How could she possibly lose to that man's game? She must win no matter what.

No matter what, she must win at all costs. Hence—

Raising her trembling arms, Fear lifted the advertising panel over her head, the one that Kana had handed over to her.

"Th-The Swimming club's specially prepared crepes, selling fast... Oh! If you don't come get them, they'll be gone in an instant!"

Fear yelled out with all the strength she could muster.

Okay, I'll do anything. So long as that man's conspiracy is crushed, I'll endure any kind of shame and do anything required. Because, this is the only way to protect Kirika and the other students.

(After all, I just need to bear this for ten minutes, it's nothing...!)

Fear muttered in her heart as though she were praying, but suddenly, she thought of Haruaki, Kirika and Cow Tits. What were those other guys doing? Were they currently undertaking unexpectedly challenging missions like herself?

(I'm already sacrificing myself to this degree, so you guys better search with your life on the line! Otherwise, I won't forgive you!)

Part 5

The gym was being used by the drama club to present a public theatrical performance. The gym's black-out curtains were currently drawn down and the space was dark. But if she were to attempt to pierce this veil of darkness with her vision, Konoha could trust her non-human body to respond reliably to her.

There were neither a lot nor very few people in the audience. While listening to a performer's loud and clear voice, Konoha intently searched the spaces between and under the rows of seats, even every nook and cranny in the gym, but did not find any signs of the dolls. Then she circled her way to the back of the gym. Perhaps Zenon might come over to check that side later—

(Might as well, since I'm here already. After all, it's not the time to be concerned with my image.)

Making sure no one was noticing, Konoha sliced through the lock to enter the gym's storeroom. She had thought that the interior of a musty storeroom would be an appropriate hiding place, but the search ended up fruitless.

Returning to the gym, she discovered it happened to be time for the interlude. Watching the stage curtain descend slowly, she thought to herself: "I guess I should check that side as well."

Quietly, she opened the door on the side of the stage that said "Only Cast and Crew Permitted" to find the backstage area where props and costumes were kept. She rapidly swept her gaze around to search for dolls

inside. There was also a strange box full of props but luckily it was a transparent chest and Konoha could verify visually that there was no doll inside.

Just as she was observing, a boy who should be part of the drama club appeared naturally and spoke to her.

"Hmm? Oh no, we'll be greatly troubled if you come running in here. This place is—"

"U-Umm—I have a friend in your club. I wanted to come here and cheer for her."

This was not a lie for Konoha really did have a good friend in the drama club. Deliberately pleading with an apologetic expression, Konoha succeeded in making the boy nod and go "I guess it can't be helped~" Under his lead, Konoha passed through a communicating passage through the back of the stage to reach another backstage area on the other side. As for searching for dolls like in the previous place—Konoha did not get a chance to do so.

"Eh, Kono-chan? Why are you here?"

"I-I came to cheer for you! The performance was so moving just now that I wanted to give you some direct encouragement!"

"Eh? Hehehe—Saying it that way makes me embarrassed~ Thank you very much!"

Dressed in a theatrical costume, the friend responded shyly. On the other hand, Konoha answered with a courteous smile and a guilty conscience.

"Hmph, you're moved that easily? That's way too cheap... I didn't miss it. You clearly made three mistakes in the performance! Firstly, you entered the stage half a second too slow! Then in the arguing scene with the heroine, the emotional expression of your dialogue—"

This sudden outburst came from a neurotic-looking and glasses-wearing male student. Judging from the color of his indoor shoes, he was an upperclassman. Konoha's friend drew her face near and whispered in Konoha's ear:

"Oh no—Our club president is a perfectionist. Seriously, he's always acting like this. A terrible guy who's completely full of himself."

"Are you listening to me!?"

Full of complaints, the club president began to mutter. The friend feigned attentiveness while she listened to his advice, but was actually ignoring him. She probably did this frequently, right?

Just at that moment, Konoha looked over to the stage. Despite thinking "It couldn't possibly be on stage, could it?", she still tried as a matter of principle—

(I can't believe it's really there! But why?)

On stage, used as a prop in a certain room, a doll was treated as part of the interior decorations and positioned inconspicuously on top of a shelf.

"—Anyway, that's that. Also... hey, how much longer are you going to dally here? I hope you won't get in the way of our performance."

"S-Sorry, I'm leaving immediately. But... Uh—By the way, the decorations on stage are really wonderful! The props are very nice! Perhaps, they're all chosen by you, the club president? I think you have excellent taste!"

The flattery plan commenced. Pushing his shining glasses up with a finger, the club president went "Hmph hmph" nasally.

"Oh... You understand? Indeed that's correct, those props were all carefully chosen by me. Actually, I was unsatisfied until the performance was about to start so it wasn't finished until thirty minutes before the opening. In any case, using these props appropriately is evidence of my extraordinary abilities."

That's why you used that thing? It's probably Pakuaki and his subordinate who deliberately placed the doll near the props, right?

Why didn't you finalize your props earlier, you incompetent fool—Konoha had only this response for him, but she refrained from say it out load.

"R-Really... Amazing... The props on stage are so awesome, I'm sure they'll be very meaningful for future remembrance."

"Hmm? Haha~ I understand what you're getting at. You want to take some of them as memorabilia after the performance? I have heard of fans doing that—But I refuse. This performance is perfect because of them. If perchance we need to perform again in a competition or something, it could very well garner the attention of schools that appreciate my genius!"

How could this perfection be destroyed? Hence, I refuse to part with any of the props!"

...Flattery plan, failed.

No good, this guy apparently would not back down no matter what. Furthermore, I can't wait for the performance to end. I need to take that doll immediately. Although the notion of rendering everyone here unconscious entered my mind as a vicious solution to take away the doll, I decided against it.

"Therefore, you should give up. Hey, please evict everyone who does not belong in the club. All performers gather! There's only five minutes until we start, but we still need to hold a meeting about the second half! I still have a ton of things to say!"

At this moment, Konoha's friend clapped her hands together in a pleading manner and went "Since our prez said so, I'm really sorry." However, Konoha could not return emptyhanded. Just as she looked towards the stage again, she discovered a slight gap near the top of the curtain. The gap was only several dozen centimeters wide, obviously not enough for a person to pass through—

"...I get it. Sorry for disturbing you so suddenly. Please do your best for the second half of the performance."

"Yes, thank you for your encouragement!"

Hence, Konoha left the backstage area with the club president nagging away in the background. Once she confirmed her surroundings, she instantly climbed to the top of the gym, using a ladder that led to a catwalk. On the far end of this catwalk, the lighting crew were busy chatting and did not notice her.

Konoha climbed directly to the front of the gym, closest to the stage where the curtains were still down. Exhaling—She proceeded to remove her clothes. Let's hope the lights don't suddenly turn on at this time.

The performers were supposed to start a meeting so they should not be paying any spare attention to the stage. Using this opportunity to sneak in, Konoha should be able to borrow the doll without anyone noticing.

(Ahhh~ Seriously, this is definitely not the time to be concerned with appearances, but why does it have to be like this...! But no way around it, I

must gather dolls as quickly as possible. The more we gather the faster the target doll will be found—In that case, will Haruaki-kun praise me...? No no no, now is not the time to be thinking about that!

Konoha shook her head forcefully, once again telling herself that "this cannot be helped." Then she bent down and removed her bra and panties. So chilly and it makes me feel so vulnerable. There are clearly dozens of students down below yet here I am, completely naked—This is totally a nightmare.

(...Hmm? I feel like I've forgotten something important... Whatever, now is not the time for contemplation either. Let's hurry and get what's necessary done and over with!)

Konoha looked up and judged the distance and timing visually. Then she—

(I've gone and sacrificed this much already. If you're not searching thoroughly, I'll definitely not forgive you, Fear-san!)

Konoha stepped over the railing and jumped down towards the stage. Then in midair, she transformed back into a Japanese sword—Right above the students' line of sight, she aimed for the gap in the curtains and successfully landed on stage as planned.

"...Was there a thud just now?" "Was there?"

"Hey, are you people even listening? Listen carefully, you must pay attention to the final scene in particular, the sense of separation between the two characters—"

The voices from backstage frightened Konoha into breaking out in cold sweat. However, it seemed like she was not discovered.

She happened to land below one of the tables used as part of the stage scenery. After turning back into human form, Konoha silently crawled her way to the shelves to take the doll she wanted.

(Phew~ ...If only it were placed backstage, then I wouldn't need to do this. Seriously... But with the doll finally in my hands, it's mission accomplished. Well then...)

At this moment, Konoha suddenly realized something, causing her face to go pale completely.

—H-How do I leave?

How could she have made such a blunder? An utterly contemptible blunder. She had predicted that her underwear would flutter off in front of the curtain if she were to return to her sword form midflight, hence the decision to strip naked beforehand. Up until that point, the plan could still be considered okay—But she had not considered what followed afterwards. There was no one to blame but herself for being too impetuous. Sure enough, her ambition for praise and merit proved fatal on the battlefield—

(However, now is the not time for thinking about such things! W-What should I do? How can I get out of this?)

At this moment, there were signs of human activity on both wings of the backstage. Konoha considered the strategy of simply knocking everybody unconscious, but even if she managed to leave the backstage area, there was still the audience once she returns to the gym side. Despite the dim lighting, was there really a way to climb up the ladder again to retrieve her clothes on the catwalk, right in front of dozens of students? While completely nude? Don't be silly!

"Okay, it's almost time for the curtain to rise. Everyone get to your positions! Listen carefully, keep your nerves taut!"

The club president's voice caused Konoha to feel a further surge of hateful resentment towards him.

(W-Wait a moment....!)

Panic. She could not possibly remain here in any event. Once the curtain rose to produce a nude girl's stage appearance, would that not be tantamount to bestowing the club president with the grand present of a legendary theatrical scene?

Konoha frantically searched her surroundings and found a cardboard box made to look like a safe as part of the set. The front side was modified by the addition of a plastic disc to simulate a dial and could even swing open to the side. This was only choice in sight that could serve as a hiding place... Hence, Konoha took the doll and desperately squeezed into the box.

Only seconds later, Konoha could sense the curtain rising with a squeaking sound of a winch. Too close for comfort. Then she started hearing the audience's applause, followed by sounds of actors not far from the cardboard box.

'Oh my god! How did things come to this!?'

"In other words~ Ooh, how did things end up like this~...?"

Konoha curled up her body inside the box as she agreed with the dialogue from the actors' exaggerated dialogue. Although she had temporarily averted the crisis, what should she do next? Konoha did not know if there would be a chance for the curtain to fall for a scene change, even if only for an instant. In that event, she could seize that chance to leave the stage, and... and... Right, all she needed to do was grab any outfit from backstage! Then she could proceed to retrieve her clothes. The only problem was being seen by people backstage, but that could not be helped. Looks like there was no way out of using tactics of mass unconsciousness...!

Just as she formed a plan in her mind—

'It's all your fault! If it weren't for you committing tax evasion, I wouldn't need to do this. But because I love you, I have no choice! I will take the money in this safe—'

Konoha heard horrifying lines from the play.

After involuntarily twitching her face once, Konoha tried shifting her position lightly within the cardboard safe—There was a rustling feeling of paper over by her bottom. This was probably a stack of prop money.

(...?)

Reflexively, Konoha grabbed the plastic object protruding into the safe—the back side of the simulated dial.

"I will take the money in this safe and light it on fire for my... love...?"

Someone outside was trying to open the safe, but could not. This was only natural because Konoha was preventing it.

(I-If this were to open...!)

Let's simply omit the appearance of a nude girl popping out of the safe, etc etc. Although Konoha considered turning back into a Japanese sword, were she to transform right now, the sword would probably pierce the cardboard box instantly due to size issues. In a certain sense, that would be even more bizarre than having a naked girl jump out.

'T-That's right, the flames of love precisely!"

Probably thinking that something was stuck inside, the actor tried even harder to pull on the dial lock. Konoha desperately held on to the dial's back side to prevent the safe's door from opening. As seconds, dozens of seconds and finally minutes ticked away, the audience below the stage began to get noisy with impatience.

Oh no, but if this stalemate continued, how would things end? Were any elements present for salvaging the situation?

Impossible, the situation would only deteriorate. Finally, there was a pop as the dial she was holding was pulled off by the actor. The resulting roar of laughter from audience was probably due to the actor falling over from the force. However, this was no laughing matter for Konoha.

The safe had now turned into an ordinary cardboard box with nothing to rescue it from the fate of being opened. Once the safe's door was opened, everything would be over.



(Ahhh... Ahhh...! I'll be seen!)

Fully exposed... Completely naked, her body would be fully exposed, a maiden's supple skin would be fully exposed.

Every inch of her body would be fully exposed to the dozens of students present. That would be utterly embarrassing. Even if she pleaded "Don't look, please don't look," it could not possibly work. People would certainly stare intently, the view burned deeply into their memories forever. Some might even take out their cellphones and snap photos. Good heavens, not only will I never be able to show my face again at this school, but I also won't be able to get married anymore—

In that case, I won't be able to get married anymore.

Suddenly, that sentence echoed in her mind.

Just because of this? Because of something utterly stupid like this?

No. I refuse to accept that. That kind of end result—I absolutely—absolutely—

At this moment, something seemed to break inside her mind and some sort of switch activated.

"...A-Argghhhh—!"

"Kyahhh!?"

Just as the cardboard box was about to be opened, Konoha forcefully extended her arms and legs and stood up. Secretly applying a Japanese sword's sharpness to her four limbs, she penetrated the cardboard spectacularly. Naturally, she did not poke her head out, instead using two eye holes she had made beforehand to see outside.

The actor, who was originally focused on handling this battle for the safe's opening, suddenly fell over in fright not too far away. All the other actors reacted similarly. One could hardly blame them for reacting in this manner to the sight of a woman's four limbs emerging from a safe that was supposed to be part of the set—especially given the outstanding level of exposure and voluptuousness displayed.

Members of the audience reacted independently with various comments of "Wahaha, how original!" "Wow—That's so erotic!" "Is this a comedy?"

"Theater of the absurd, that's what people call this, right?" Thinking "Say whatever you want, after all, I'm just a weirdo, the cardboard box lady!" to herself, Konoha jumped down from stage, rushed over to the ladder and climbed up to the catwalk as quickly as if she were flying. After retrieving her clothes, she jumped out the nearest window—Although jumping out of a second floor window would cause an even greater commotion, like she cared!

"Ooh... Ah ooh... Fufufu, hahaha, ahahaha..."

With super speed, Konoha fled to somewhere deserted, finally stopping behind the building where the club rooms were located. But for some reason, she started to laugh drily.

"Haruaki-kun, I-I... I did it. I protected... something important...!"

Although she also felt like she had lost something else that was important in the process, Konoha decided not to delve into the matter. In any case, the doll was in her hands.

"I've already sacrificed so much, for sure... This must..."

Konoha swiftly put on her uniform and happily confirmed the doll's contents.

Naturally, it turned out to be empty.

An overflowing urge to kill, rising.

Part 6

"Those two girls, I wonder if they're searching seriously..."

"I'm sure they should be searching very seriously. But before worrying about them, I think we need to fulfill our own duties first. Okay, Yachi, next is that cleaning equipment closet."

Receiving instructions from Kirika who continued to walk with her hands against his back, Haruaki opened the cleaning equipment closet in the corridor.

"Oh, there's one! Let's see... Drats, nothing inside!"

"That's six already, right? Our hands are almost completely full."

"The superintendent's office is quite close, so let's make a detour there first. If Zenon-san is there, we could even get a summary of our progress. If those two girls happen to make a detour there as well, we could check out their progress too."

Hence, Haruaki began to make his way to the superintendent's office with Kirika pushing his back. He had already grown quite accustomed to this state, but whether he himself was used to it was not the main issue.

"Class Rep, are you okay?"

"Yeah... I'm okay. Because... there's still your back."

Haruaki felt her patting his shoulder lightly a few times. Since Kirika was carrying dolls in one hand, he only felt this on his right shoulder.

Hearing someone say "there's still your back" actually felt rather embarrassing. Haruaki knew that he was not too reliable usually but felt quite happy for the fact that he was being slightly useful for once.

"Really? That's good... Seriously, how could that guy do something like this? Isn't he your older brother, Class Rep, and you're his sister? But..."

"By this point... I've long given up—on seeing him as my brother."

Her voice was ice-cold. Haruaki could feel her slightly tightening her grip on his shoulder. But that gesture did not feel like she was asking him to stop talking.

"You thought differently in the past?"

"In the past, huh..."

"Nothing much, you don't need to tell me if you don't want to."

"Fufu." Kirika laughed wryly.

"You're really a nice guy to a fault. I find it incredible that you've never asked about this until now... But it's true, I should take this opportunity to tell you a bit about my family. However, it dates back to before that guy started calling himself 'Yamimagari Pakuaki.'"

"Ah. Sure enough, that isn't his real name, right?"

"Of course. How could such a crazy name exist in this world. Besides, the family name is different from mine."

Haruaki had originally thought they might be half-siblings or something. However, Kirika seemed to read his mind and added: "That guy definitely was my brother by blood."

"So... My mother passed away from illness not long after my birth, but I still had my father. He was a private researcher employed by some rich tycoon or dilettante. Although I have very little recollection, his research should be in folkloristics or something like that. The tycoon was fascinated with cursed tools—Wathes, in other words—and hence pursued investigations as a rich man's hobby."

"Right~ There do indeed exist a lot of these rich and fearless people."

"Perhaps. Next, let's talk about that guy. My father was apparently highly talented, but that guy surpassed him. Summed up in a single word, he is a genius. That guy graduated from high school with honors and finished university abroad as the top student in his graduating class. Then he became a researcher like my father. After returning to Japan, he began working under the same employer as my father's—That was when he started to act strange."

"He changed completely?"

"No, not really. He was still himself, personality completely unchanged—An overly playful genius, free and unfettered. Speaking of which, he ended up like that precisely because he's a genius. In other words, entering an environment that allowed him to make full use of his natural talent was what caused him to settle into his role as a genius. Let me ask you, Yachi, what do you think are the conditions for someone to maximize his potential as a genius? What do you think is required?"

No idea. Haruaki fell silent. Then he heard Kirika sigh.

"Unknowns."

".....?"

"For example, genius talent cannot be maximized if all one faced were an elementary student's arithmetic exercises. A genius requires 'challenges that no one else could solve.' In other words, Wathes. By becoming aware of the unknowns brought about by the existence of cursed tools, that guy awakened something within himself."

"You mean 'discovering the best research subject' or something along those lines?"

"Normally speaking, that should be it. But there's still too many details I'm not clear on, so I'll just talk about what I know. When I was about to enter middle school, my father and that guy stopped coming home. After I waited for a few days, that guy returned. Then after saying something incomprehensible all on his own like 'Don't you feel that this world is full of unknowns?' He proceeded to ask me: 'Our father is dead, do you want to come with me? Or do you want to live alone? What are your plans?' As a young girl, what choice did I have apart from following him? That's how simple it was."

Haruaki originally wanted to ask "How did your father—" but he shut his mouth. Judging from the force from the hand gripping his shoulder, he knew it was not a question that should be asked recklessly. Furthermore, Kirika probably did not know the answer either... Or perhaps, she was not told the answer.

"Then that guy started calling himself 'Yamimagari Pakuaki' and started establishing the organization of the Lab Chief's Nation. Apparently by that time, the organization's foundations were already firmly entrenched... I don't know what methods he used, but he probably took over his employer's power and influence perhaps? Money and connections, the original research staff, Wathes as experimental subjects, there must have been plenty that he could make use of."

Haruaki kept racking his brain for meaningful responses, but all he could manage were exceedingly ordinary comments. He really found himself quite useless, but he knew that was the limit of his abilities.

"I see... It must have been difficult for you, Class Rep. However, it does clear up one mystery for me."

"Just one? Many mysteries should have cleared up instead, right?"

"No, what I mean is a mystery that I couldn't figure out from a very long time ago. It was because your cooking skills are clearly much better than an average girl's. So it turns out because your mother was absent in your life, you probably had to cook for your father and brother from a young age. Perhaps that explains it..."

This resulted in a momentary freeze frame. Then—

"Haha... Ahahahaha!"

Haruaki could hear delightful laughter coming from behind and nonstop patting on his back.

"To think I expected you to say something different, how absolutely ridiculous. That really isn't any major mystery. Besides, to hear praise coming from you whom I've never beaten in our lunch contests—Fufu. How troubling, seriously, absolutely ridiculous..."

This time, the touch of her hand felt lighter, closer to a caress, but Haruaki felt greater pressure applied. Hence, he glanced back, only to find Kirika's hand slightly more withdrawn than previous—in other words, resting against Haruaki's back. Perhaps the sense of loneliness caused by the collar might increase again?

Then Haruaki and Kirika arrived quickly at the superintendent's office. As soon as the door opened, they were immediately met with the sight of a mountain of dolls.

"Wow, there's a whole pile already."

"Welcome back, Yachi-sama. And... Ueno-san."

With paper spread out on the desk, Zenon was engaged in some kind of task. Her eyes seemed slightly suspicious. This was because they had not explained to Zenon the matter of Kirika—namely, the whole backstory of why someone placed dolls containing a bomb in the school. Haruaki's group had simply made up an excuse about enemies attacking the school, similar to Bivorio's visit last time.

"Uh—So naturally, I asked you for help! After all, you're very discreet with secrets, ummm... And a good person as well!"

"...So that's what's going on."

"Is that so? So long as you think that this is appropriate, Yachi-sama, I have no objections. Of course, the more helpers the better—Speaking of helpers, I tried calling Ganon-oneesama for assistance but couldn't reach her, unfortunately. Without any recourse, I personally investigated the vicinity of the infirmary myself... And found her cellphone on the desk. Very likely, she went to check out the cultural festival without taking her phone."

"She's really easy-going huh... So, how's the overall situation?"

"We have currently found twenty-three dolls, but regrettably, none of them are the target. I am currently marking on this map of the school all the searched locations and where dolls have been discovered."

"That's really quite a lot. By the way, I've got six dolls here, so that makes a total of twenty-nine."

Haruaki reported to Zenon the places he had searched and discovered dolls to mark down on the map. It looked like half the school had already been searched.

"Both the number of dolls and the places investigated have passed the halfway mark, but we still haven't found the target... Damn it! Oh by the way, since you have so many dolls here, did Fear or Konoha happen to visit?"

"Yes, they have both visited once each... When I asked them to report the progress of their search, Konoha-sama seemed to react in a manner similar to that doll's state..."

Haruaki looked over to where Zenon pointed. Among the mountain of dolls, there was one in particular that was ragged and tattered for some reason. Indeed, it was almost as if someone had experienced something unbearably vexing and consequently took out their frustrations on the doll.

"Although I have no idea what the cause might be, she seemed rather furious."

"...I can imagine too."

Haruaki agreed ambiguously. What on earth could have happened to Konoha?

"Then what about Fear?"

"As for Fear-sama—Well, she seemed to be gradually getting more and more anxious. It felt as though she was imagining some sort of unpleasant future."

Haruaki frowned with worry but immediately changed his mind to think "It can't be helped." After all, the target was still not found despite having recovered more than half of the dolls. Although he was not going to say "it's time to hurry," neither would it be appropriate to be leisurely going "it'll be found eventually."

"In any case, we must find the target doll as soon as possible... So, Class Rep!"

"Yes, let's continue on our search."

Controlled from behind by Kirika, Haruaki started looking around again. At this moment, he heard Zenon's questioning voice.

"...So, Yachi-sama, are you suffering from some sort of punishment that restricts your freedom of movement?"

"Uh—There are many reason for this! Please don't mind it!"

"I see..."

Next, Haruaki and Kirika left the superintendent's office as though they were fleeing. Only now was Haruaki confronted with the urgency of getting rid of Kirika's collar in addition to the obvious mission of preventing the bomb from exploding. After all, he really hated the strange way he was getting used to this situation of conjoined twins.

Just as he wondered "what does Class Rep think about this?" and was about to turn his head back, however—

"Hey Yachi, please pay attention in front of you. Otherwise, don't blame me for what happens next."

"Oh, yeah. If I keep looking left and right, it feels like someone's going to just roll over me."

"I-I haven't been pushing you forward like mad, have I? If you're about to collide into something, just halt your footsteps. That's not what I mean anyway... Since that guy set up this kind of game, the two of them shouldn't be attacking us directly in theory, but it's best not to be too careless. That's what I was talking about."

Haruaki understood what she meant. Indeed, they should be vigilant.

As low as the chances of being attacked directly may seem, he was currently separated from Fear and Konoha. Although that scenario should not be happening, but what if—What if they encountered an enemy attack under these conditions?

Haruaki understood that it would be a very serious situation.

Next, they made their way to the calligraphy classroom located on the second floor of the school building.

"Hmm—Not a single person here."

Simply seeing the sign that read "Calligraphy Club's Exhibition" was enough to get a strong feeling that there would not be any people. Sure enough, the hunch ended up correct and the room turned out to be deserted. There were only two occupants, namely, Haruaki and Kirika.

The words "Please feel free to look around" were written in large characters on the blackboard. On top of the stationary desks, calligraphy paper was suitably arranged to display spectacularly flowing strokes of ink that were impossible to tell if they were written well or not. Logically speaking, they should have left at least one club member to attend to things... But sadly enough, even the calligraphy club members themselves probably realized that this was not an attractive exhibit. Seeing as this was the case, surely they must have decided to cancel the boring job and simply allow their members to enjoy the cultural festival fully. They made the right choice.

"But judging from the fact that there isn't even a single visitor, you can't really blame the calligraphy club's members for leaving..."

"It's not like it's a bad thing, right? Deserted is better for us, actually. This gives us a chance to investigate."

In order to avoid missing any hiding places, the two of them searched thoroughly but swiftly. However, their search ended fruitlessly without even an empty doll turning up. Still, there was no time to feel depressed and just as the pair was about to set off for the next area—

Visitors arrived.

However, those were definitely not visitors one would hope to find—In other words, they had not arrived for the purpose of admiring the calligraphy.

"Ohoh, I suppose this would be considered perfect convenience."

"...Eh?"

His mind filled with question marks, Haruaki was completely baffled. He could only react in this manner to the sight before him—two completely incomprehensible figures. Simply stated—

One was a wet woman youkai while the other was someone suited up from head to toe in a skull masked costume

Chapter 3 - Carnival Festival / Willful Dance Between the Mask and the Monster / "Landfisher VS."

Part 1

"After careful examination in an isolated place, even I can recognize the face now. Indeed, that's him... Little miss helper, could you please lock up that door there?"

"Sigh—then I'll close it first."

The skull mascot sighed as if lamenting over some sort of misfortune, then proceeded to close and lock the classroom door. Perhaps due to something like a voice changer, the resulting voice was hoarse and artificial-sounding. The mascot was wearing a dark-colored suit similar to a gentleman's tuxedo. The head was essentially just a skull. This character's back story apparently consisted of a dark hero who was awakened from hell.

(I think it was called... Bludgeoning Gentleman Gasha Skull? That's right, it's the costume the girl mentioned that was stolen.)

Haruaki had forgotten all about it due to all the things that happened afterwards—Why would this mascot appear here now? Who on earth was this guy anyway?

Then there was the other person. The wet woman with the cheerful voice, who was she? Putting aside the question of whether she was a youkai or not, one thing was certain: she was definitely the wet woman.

Dressed in a white parka with a cute design, she had her hood pulled down low. The parka was the long type whose length reached down to the bottom of her hips. Her outfit did not include a skirt or anything similar. Exposed beneath the parka's hem were a pair of white and voluptuous thighs. Her long and slender legs reached down to her sandal-clad feet. Her legs were soaking wet, no matter how you looked, with the water droplets on skin surface especially emphasizing the tender smoothness of her thighs. Naturally, not only were her legs wet, but even the parka worn on her upper body was also dripping with water.

"Oh my—How wonderful, I've been searching for you for so long... To run into you in this place where it's unlikely for interlopers to appear, that's truly fortunate. This must be a reward for my everyday good behavior, ufufufu."

The woman was carrying a long, rod-shaped object that was wrapped in a piece of cloth. Resting it against the back of her neck, she kept her hand on it while she slowly pulled up her hood.

The woman was probably twenty-years-old roughly. She was not Japanese and the distinctive red color of her long hair was very memorable.

Naturally, her hair was also wet like the rest of her body. Peering through the hair that clung to her face was a pair of eyes that seemed like they were struggling to stay open after a sleepless night. This stood in stark contrast to her inexorably energetic expression, making her look as though she had spent an entire night high on drugs.

With water dripping from her fingers, she then pulled down the zipper of her parka.

"I find this rather incomprehensible... This should be the type of woman that would drive Fear-kun nuts on sight. So, Yachi, I'd like a simple explanation for your gulping just now. Perhaps you happen to worship large busts? How absolutely ridiculous!"

"I'm just feeling nervous, okay!? After all, these people make no sense at all."

Indeed, no sense at all.

Revealed beneath the unzipped parka was a highly revealing bikini swimsuit. Well-toned abdominal muscles could be seen around her dripping wet navel. However, the curves that water droplets traced out as they flowed down her cleavage were amazingly large like those of foreigners.

Staring at her voluptuous body, Kirika spoke in a stiff tone of voice:

"You mentioned 'searching for you for so long' just now, right? Are you referring to us? Who are you?"

"Now this is a so-called interrogation! Ufufufu, then I shall reveal my name. I am Oratorie Rabdulmunagh, but I also have this «Landfisher» nickname."

The name sounded familiar to Kirika and she desperately racked her brain to recall it.

"...Pakuaki seemed to have mentioned it earlier. The name of the Family member who had escaped from one of the branch labs."

"Th-That's right, it definitely was a name that sounded something like that..."

"Completely correct. I am a member of the Family. Oh right, I should also correct a mistake you made."

The mysterious wet woman in a swimsuit—Oratorie—put down the rod from her shoulder in an extremely nature manner. Humming a song to herself, she happily began to untie the cloth around the object.

"Ufufufu, I'm not searching for the 'us' that you mentioned."

"...What?"

"Like. I. Already. Said. You're completely unimportant to me. In other words, the one I'm looking for is..."

Inside the unwrapped cloth was a wooden oar.

An aged and slightly filthy-looking wooden oar.

She effortlessly picked up the heavy-looking oar with one hand and rested it on her shoulder, then—

"Haruaki Yachi. That's your name, right? Ufufu, excuse me but I have a request for you—"

Oratorie seemed very happy and very very happy at that.

After announcing her goal, she immediately sprang into action.

"—I hope you can die obediently!"

With wet squishy footsteps that completely failed to match the current mood, Oratorie charged forward.

"Yachi, stay back!"

Kirika shoved Haruaki's chest, forcing him to retreat behind her. Although Oratorie's motives were completely unknown, her murderous intent was enough to prove that she was serious.

"B-Be careful! That oar is most likely..."

"I know!"

From Kirika's right sleeve, a black belt slithered out and extended—The deadly weapon that was crowned with the name of the «Tragic Black River» serial killer. Having absorbed much killing intent in the past, this belt now moved to subdue the current killing intent at hand.

Haruaki turned his gaze and thought "What about the other person?" The thief in the mascot costume was currently leaning against the wall, arms crossed. He, or perhaps she, seemed to be staring at the floor repeatedly as though deep in thought, then—

"Since there's only one opponent, you should be able to handle her without much effort... I'll just watch from the side for now."

"Oh—really? If that's the case, I don't really mind!"

The swimsuit woman—Oratorie—answered without even looking back. Haruaki did not really understand their conversation, but it was fortunate that they were not attacking together. However, even if it were one on one, was Kirika really going to be okay?

Facing off against Oratorie whose parka and red hair fluttered as she closed in, Kirika slid between the stationary desks as she extended the «Tragic Black River». Oratorie jumped onto a desk to evade in response. Then Kirika entangled a leg of the teacher's desk to lift it and throw the table at her enemy. However, Oratorie took one look at the desk that was flying at her from a dead angle and simply moved her arm. Swinging the wooden oar nonchalantly, she effortlessly deflected the desk towards the edge of the classroom. What truly horrific arm strength.

"That really must be a Wathe? Not bad. However, you really should cherish it. Every night, you must caress, stroke, embrace and kiss it. You should also murder people with it, for it is something that can save your life—But right now, may I ask you to stop? Since this is a very very important transcender, if possible, I'd prefer not to break it."

"What kind of nonsense are you babbling about...? If that's the case, you should simply stand there and stop moving!"

Kirika extended the «Tragic Black River» directly towards the oar. The belt, which had absorbed the blood of numerous victims in the past, reached out forcefully towards that slightly dirty-looking oar, attempting to entangle it—

But failed to entangle it.

"What...?"

Kirika could not understand why the belt, which had clearly wrapped around the oar, simply lingered emptily in midair.

"Ufufufu, I did as you told and stopped moving. But now, I'm going to move."

Jumping down from the desk, Oratorie swung the oar, forcibly ripping a stationary desk out from its base and sending it flying with a loud impact. This was not limited to that one desk. Every desk she encountered suffered the same fate.

Kirika tried her best to dodge the shattered remains of the desks. In an attempt to slow down Oratorie's advance, she ran into a space between some desks but it ended up counterproductive. Failing to dodge a large piece of debris, Kirika was struck in the leg, causing her to lose balance and fall down on the spot.

"Class Rep!"

"Stay away!"

Yelling loudly in response, Kirika continued to control her belt. Although she still could not understand what had happened earlier, this was her only weapon. She extended the belt between the gaps of the flying debris, but Oratorie had already disappeared from there.

Standing crouched horizontally on a wall on the side, she was sticking right to the wall. The scene was as though the world had been rotated ninety degrees. A scene ignoring the law of gravity.

Sure enough, this strange phenomenon was accomplished by the oar in her hand that was being used to support her body. Its front end was buried into the wall. Rather than digging a hole in the wall, the oar had slid into it smoothly.

The corners of her mouth upturned in a smile, Oratorie gave the wall a kick from her current posture. The reaction force propelled her straight towards Kirika. While in midair, Oratorie swung the oar.

"Tsk—"

Kirika was just about to sit up. Unable to evade Oratorie, she used the «Tragic Black River» to drag a desk's remains to act as a shield. However—

"—«Tragedy Method»!"

"Huh...!?"

It passed straight through.

With that, it became certain. The «Tragic Black River»'s inability to entangle the oar, the way Oratorie stuck to the wall, as well as her attack passing through the debris—All this proved that the oar possessed an ability related to "phasing."

As a result, Kirika's right upper arm was mercilessly struck by the massive oar. At the same time, the heavy piece of wood's destructive power was converted into sound—a mixture of the two different noises from the crushing of flesh and the shattering of bone.

"Cl-Class Rep...!"

Kirika was too occupied to reply to Haruaki and could only lie collapsed on the floor, moaning painfully.

However, Oratorie refused to stop. Naughtily, she stuck her tongue out and said:

"Yes, it's useless! It's already useless! Ufufu, let me express my sincere condolences for your misfortune... Also, I see your black panties~ Eh, what's with that zipper there? What a super kinky design! Do Japanese high school girls all wear underwear like that? I find it rather moving, so I'll spare your life."

Then she repeated her attack motions.

Lifting the oar, she swung it down.

Repeating that simple motion several times, dozens of times.

She aimed at the same spot every time—Kirika's right arm was where all the attacks were focused. Rather than crushed, the flesh of Kirika's arm was essentially smashed apart. Rather than shattered, the bone was essentially minced with the flesh. Every time the wooden oar struck that

spot, there was a definite splash of crimson liquid that Haruaki had no wish to see.

Oratorie simply pummeled her, pummeling overwhelmingly.

The oar violently repeated "Smack... Smack... Smack smack smack!"

"Guh! Gah! A-Ahh... Nngg! Kyaah—!"

"Ufufu, ufufufu! Now this would be a so-called beating! A beating!"

"S-Stop it! Stop it right now——!"

"I won't stop, ufufufu, because I am a member of the Family. We must offer shelter to our beloved transcoders, the Wathes. I'm going to pull off this girl's arm to take the belt back with me. Just a wait a little while, Haruaki Yachi. If there's no possibility of someone interfering, I will kill her slowly!"

No! Absolutely... This cannot be allowed to happen. No!

Haruaki racked his brain to find a solution. If he rushed forward recklessly, he would lose for sure. He was greatly frustrated by his powerlessness. Or perhaps he could throw a desk's remains to divert Oratorie's attention to buy time for an escape—No, he should phone Konoha to call her here. If Konoha were present, the Sword-Kill Counter could instantly handle this woman... No, that was not for certain. Very likely, even that move might pass through the oar. But there was no time to hesitate over such issues. In any case, Haruaki understood very clearly that his power alone could not help in any manner—

His chaotic thoughts were interrupted by the sound of a window shattering violently.

Jumping in through this second floor window was neither Konoha nor Fear.

Un Izoey had arrived instead.

"My wish: elimination of what my eyes cannot tolerate."

Performing a flip in the air, the knife in her right foot was thrust forward like lightning. The sudden attack was so swift that even Oratorie could not ignore it. She stopped beating Kirika and swung the oar up, barely managing to evade the knife's attack and distancing herself from her opponent.

"...Who are you?"

"No obligation to answer, hence, answer is nothing."

They glared at each other. However, Haruaki had no time to care about them. Frantically, he rushed over to Kirika's side. Her state was quite dismal—But Kirika was also wearing another Wathe apart from the «Tragic Black River». Hence, her wounds were writhing away, gradually recovering.

"Gwooh! Huff... Ah..."

"Class Rep, Class Rep!"

Haruaki supported Kirika's upper body. She looked at her right arm and said:

"I... I'm fine. How absolutely ridiculous, did she really intend to hack off my arm like that...!? But thanks to that, I wasn't killed immediately... Hmm... mmm...?"

"Don't speak anymore. Although the current situation totally blows my mind, that girl seems to be helping us—"

Kirika started hugging her arms and shivering. It seemed to be unrelated to her right arm's injuries. Haruaki frowned and said:

"Could this be the result of that collar? Right, we've been separated all this time!"

"I was thinking a moment of separation would be fine. Damn it, this seems to be something similar to backlash... Here I go?"

"U-Umm, what should I do now? Contact... I'm already touching you, uh—?"

Her body held in his arms, Kirika's face twitched. Perhaps due to the pain in her arm, her eyes were still filled with tears. Kirika forcefully narrowed her eyes but her body trembled even more intensely. Casting her gaze towards the side, she murmured softly:

"If possible, umm... If... you could embrace me tighter... No, if you don't want to, then it's fine to just keep things like this... The current wave should subside eventually, perhaps—Kyah!"

If that would help, I'll do it no matter how many times it takes. After all, it's all I can do with my meager ability.

With self-contempt weighing in his heart, Haruaki wrapped his arms around Kirika's shoulders and embraced her. He was somehow hearing exceptionally adorable screams but he pretended not to hear them. So hot, Kirika's blood was so hot. Haruaki did not care about getting his uniform dirty. He already knew that the blood would flow back into the wound as it healed, but even if it did not, he probably would not care about bloodstains anyway.



After a while, Kirika sighed slightly. It felt as though she was feeling very relieved and very satisfied.

Just as Haruaki gently supported her body, intending to check out her expression—

"Oh dear, I never would have expected even Oratorie Rabdulmunagh to be here as well. What kind of fated encounter is this?"

Haruaki hastily turned around upon hearing the voice. Pakuaki was standing just behind him. Just how far was he capable of coming and going without warning?

Kirika's face instantly changed with alarm. With a grim and severe expression, she said:

"Pakuaki! What is the meaning of your words—"

This resulted in a chain reaction in the situation at hand. Instantly, the skull mascot, who had been leaning against the wall apathetically, drew a knife from somewhere and charged towards Haruaki's group.

"Oh, there's a strange hero character here too? No matter, Un Izoey, I'll leave that to you as well."

"Affirmative."

The dark-skinned girl leapt freely. Moving about on her cuffed hands, her control of her motions and posture was as precise as though moving on one's feet. Her knife-wielding leg also handled the enemy as though it were an arm. Un Izoey's fluttering skirt, upside down and swaying gray hair, her dark-skinned legs reaching up and out freely—These were all unprecedented and bizarre movements. However, it undoubtedly managed to seal off the movements of the enemy duo. Skillfully evading the oar that Oratorie swung with monstrous strength, she also turned and dodged when Oratorie made use of the phasing ability, changing her position as though she were sliding, deflecting the knife from the skull mascot who had approached with astounding speed.

"W-What the heck is going on...?"

The mascot thief and the wet woman had both arrived. Haruaki expected to be attacked by the wet woman but had not foreseen that further enemies would enter the fray and battle—The situation was far too chaotic, impossible to understand.

But without giving Haruaki enough time to figure things out, the situation continued to change continuously.

"Oh jeez, what the heck is going on here...!? Nothing is more annoying than this girl getting in my way here. Rather than fighting you, I should get rid of my target first—"

"—Don't be careless!"

The mascot thief's warning came too late. Un Izoey was truly a master and did not miss the opening. The instant Oratorie's attention was diverted from the opponent towards Haruaki in the back—Un Izoey slid towards her feet. The knife on Un Izoey's foot skillfully evaded the sudden thrust of Oratorie's reflexive counterattack and slashed open her thigh.

"Guah...!"

"My warning to you: a warning not to not pay attention."

Despite almost losing balance, Oratorie did not fall over. Despite the large amount of blood flowing down her thigh, she continued to glare vigorously forward, raising her oar in a combat-ready stance. But the bleeding wound was obviously no minor wound. Naturally, everyone present could tell she was heavily injured.

"Let me give you another warning, Oratorie Rabdulmunagh. After sustaining such a severe wound, you should be incapable of fighting any longer. Why don't you give up and flee? If you don't stop the bleeding, you'll probably die soon... Hahaha, but fortunately, this is a school. If you rush over to the infirmary right now, perhaps a gentle school physician might bandage and treat you?"

"Yamimagari... Pakuaki..."

"But it doesn't matter either if you don't flee. Although I have no idea how you managed to escape in the first place, you are an escaped prisoner from one of the branch labs. If I could capture you again right here, it would help highlight my dignity as the Lab Chief—"

Just at this moment, the clang of blades clashing rang out. The skull mascot still remained active and was engaged in an intense battle with Un Izoey. Slashing so swiftly that one's eyes would have difficulty following, the weirdo spoke with displeasure:

"Tsk—I said so earlier, if you are rendered immobile, I'm going to continue without you, right? I'm sorry but the current situation is unsuited to providing you with cover or treatment. Thus ends our cooperative relationship. It ended much faster than I expected, how disappointing... Oh?"

"My warning to you: avoid meaningless chatter."

Devoid of talking for a few seconds, only the sound of blades clashing remained. Then Haruaki heard Oratorie clicking her tongue. Looking at the wound on her thigh impatiently, she stroked the water droplets in front of her chest as she spoke:

"You really chose a great moment to stab me in the back, little miss helper... But this bleeding really doesn't bode well and it's almost time for me to refill my water—Damn it, there's no other choice!"

Staring at Haruaki's group as she retreated, she opened the locked door of the calligraphy classroom.

"Haruaki Yachi... You narrowly escaped death for now, but I have not given up."

"W-Why do you want to kill me? Give me a reason!"

"I... must find out. There are things I must find out, therefore—Oh no, that was close, really close. I have no obligation to tell you. Anyway, I'll be right back. I forbid you to run away. Stay here and wait for me!"

Then Oratorie opened the door and left. As much as Haruaki hoped she would not draw too much attention, it was useless to care now.

"Anyway, how could I possibly not run away... Class Rep, can you move?"

"Yeah, just barely. My arm has recovered enough to move."

"Then let's leave from the window. After all, the mysterious hero character is still desperately swinging a dangerous weapon. Using your «Tragic», you should be able to lower us to the ground, right?"

Kirika stood up and glared viciously at Pakuaki who was leaning leisurely against the window frame. Shaking the belt lightly, she said:

"Before we escape, I could strangle your neck and interrogate you for the bomb's location."

"My advice? You'd better not. Because in that very instant, Un Izoey will come running over here. Do you think you can handle her alone?"

Kirika clicked her tongue lightly. In the end, the belt did not entangle Pakuaki's neck but a thick water pipe in a corner of the classroom.

"Yachi, hold onto me tight, we're going down."

"...Yeah, okay."

This could not be helped. After all, Kirika's injuries were not completely healed so their only choice was to escape and regroup. Wondering which part of her body to hang onto, Haruaki hesitated for a few seconds before finally gripping Kirika's left arm. Just as the two stepped over the window frame, Kirika turned her solemn gaze back towards the classroom interior.

"—Why help me?"

"Hahaha, now that really is a stupid question. Does a brother even need a reason to help his cute little sister?"

This conversation ended with Kirika's clicking of her tongue again. After cracking the whip in a threatening manner to produce a large noise, she slowly extended it to lower them outside the window.

Although she was feigning calmness, Haruaki wondered how much it hurt for her arm to support both their weight before she had fully recovered. In order to slightly ease her burden, Haruaki let go and jumped down when they were a couple meters from the ground. Soon after, Kirika also landed.

This was behind the school building, free from bystanders' gazes. Haruaki then rushed frantically to Kirika's side.

"Cl-Class Rep..."

"If you're worried about the state of my body, I'm fine. It should heal up completely soon... But my clothes are torn to some degree. Putting that aside for now, what should we do about that Oratorie woman? Although I find it absolutely ridiculous, her goal seems to be killing you. Do you know why someone would want to hunt you down and kill you?"

"Oh... Some kind of reason? Could it be related to Abyss...? But because too many things happened during the sports festival, I was completely helpless. I'm really not too clear."

Haruaki conversed with Kirika as he decided to leave this place first. After all, the enemy could descend from overhead again... However, Haruaki got the impression that compared to himself, the skull mascot's target seemed more likely to be Pakuaki.

As before, Haruaki walked in front while Kirika pushed him from behind.

"Let's put aside the reason why I'm being hunted, what should we do now? Since it's the Family, who knows what horrible things they'll do? It would be tragic if she suddenly attacked in places with other students. Even if that woman is wounded, it's still impossible to feel relief."

"Yeah, but we still have a more troubling problem compared to that woman right now. Putting it more strongly, it's still okay to push back Oratorie's matter till tomorrow to handle, but our most urgent problem has a time limit."

"But it'd be bad if someone interrupted us in the process... Gwah—This is just going in circles! Damn it, what on earth should we do...?"

A whole host of troubling problems but there was no time to waste in contemplation like this. While they walked in this manner, the time limit gradually loomed closer. Although it was uncertain whether Oratorie would attack in a crowd, once the time limit arrived, the bomb was surely going to explode. Fighting Oratorie now would just be a waste of time. If she could not be subdued in one go, if she were allowed to escape again, there would be no end to their troubles. But if they left her to roam free, who knew what could happen—What a dilemma.

"Ugh... Let me call Konoha first. There's so much I need to tell her."

Haruaki took out his cellphone, but just as he was about to dial the number, his fingers stopped.

What he recalled was that Fear did not have a cellphone, so the message could not be passed along until she reported to the superintendent's office. Another issue—was what was currently surfacing in his mind.

Then Haruaki immediately moved his fingers and called Konoha. After a few dozen rings, the call finally picked up. Haruaki quickly explained everything that had happened to this point. Then he sighed deeply after that.

"So... How should I say this? I need a favor from you."

Part 2

Severely injured by the dark-skinned girl who had appeared inexplicably, Oratorie escaped from the classroom that smelled heavily of ink and moved while dodging people's gazes. It would be best to get her wound treated before she was discovered and a commotion arose. However, that might prove to be a challenge.

Moving along the back of the school building, she peered into every window she came across. After repeating this for a while, she finally found the location she wanted on the ground floor of the school building facing the school yard.

It was the infirmary. Although she did not come here to follow that man's orders, it was the only place where she could stop the bleeding. As far as she was concerned, she was totally not going to abandon her goal and leave the school.

There was no one in the room—even the school physician was nowhere to be found. This delicate timing was quite a mixed blessing. Either way, whether "threatening someone to treat her wounds then kill off the witness depending on circumstances" or "finding medication to stop the bleeding herself," both were considerable chores.

In any case, Oratorie opened the window that was not locked and entered.

"How troubling. What should I do? Disinfect, inject a hemostatic agent and bandage it? After all, as long as it allows me to move freely, anything is fine... Would taping it be better? Where are the bandages? Ah~ jeez, this is such a chore..."

Just as she was muttering while she ransacked the medication shelves...

"Excuse me—Doctor, he's not feeling very well, can he come in to rest—"

Two students had entered. One was a short boy who was holding a schoolbag while the other was a girl who was helping him walk by offering her shoulder to lean on for support. Judging from their closeness, it was only natural to conclude that they were probably a steady couple.

(Ah, the springtime of youth... Well, what should I do? Should I kill them?)

As soon as they started screaming and yelling, it would be too late. Yes, I should go for a preemptive strike. Making this simple decision, Oratorie

gripped the wooden oar and turned to face the two students. Just as she took a step forward—

"G-Good heavens! You're heavily injured! Please don't move!"

"...Huh?"

"Sorry, Ren-kun, why don't you sit on the bed and rest first. I must tend to this person's wound first."

"O-Okay..."

The boy obeyed and sat on the bed while the girl knelt down before Oratorie to examine the wound on her thigh. Very soon, she frowned and said:

"What a severe wound...! Why are you still standing? Hurry up and sit down! I'll treat you immediately but my skills might not be great! Ahhh~ Seriously, so many things are happening today...!"

The girl began to search the shelves desperately. While it would be perfectly easy to take this opportunity to swing the «Tragedy Method» against the back of her head, Oratorie was slightly at a loss as to how to react to the girl's behavior. Also—

"Umm... I think you'd better listen to Hina-chan and sit down. Here, take this chair and have a seat."

The boy brought a pipe chair and placed it next to Oratorie. Looking like he was trembling slightly, he bowed politely and returned to sit on the bed.

(Hmm—They didn't go yelling and screaming and she's even helping to treat my wound. Perhaps there's no need to kill them at this moment?)

Spacing out as she pondered such matters, Oratorie was finally won over by the desire to avoid anything troublesome.

"Then thank you. I hope you could work a bit faster, because I've bled quite a lot earlier already."

"Wow, you speak Japanese really well... No wait, now is not the time for this! I-I got it! Uh... Here's the antiseptic, uh... Bandage, where are the bandages? Oh my—Where has Hyoujou-sensei run off to at a time like this... Hurry and come back!"

Now sitting on the chair, Oratorie examined the two students once more. The girl that was called Hina-chan had thick glasses with strong lenses, hair that was sloppily tied behind her head and a skirt that was not very short, combining to give a rather unfashionable impression. However, her personality did not seem especially introverted and her natural assets were actually not bad, what a shame. Keeping these unimportant comments to herself, Oratorie wondered "If she switched to wearing contacts, she'd probably be the type who goes from an ugly duckling to a swan."

As for that boy called Ren-kun, he stood in stark contrast to the girl. His adorable appearance and timid, cowardly impression combined to instill an urge in others to protect him. The type of handsome boy who was like a small pet.

"Got it, this is it! Well then, let's wipe this and disinfect it..."

"Hey little girl, are you one of those health committee students who are in charge of health-related matters? I've heard that there exists this kind of system in Japanese schools."

"Ah, no, I'm not, actually."

"Then why are you willing to treat my wound?"

The girl was wiping Oratorie's wound and applying a piece of gauze with liquid antiseptic on it.

"Umm, I'm the type who can't resist helping whenever I see anyone in need. If I leave them alone, it weighs on my conscience... Although my parents and friends always say I'll get taken advantage of like this, I do it because I want to help people, so it's fine. Last time when I helped an old granny with her luggage, my friend even laughed at me for being a 'rare and modern Good Samaritan.' But it's true, that's my style."

"Ah, that's right, that's right. That type of person does exist. Even I know someone who's like that. However, this is stinging quite severely, could you be slightly~ more gentle?"

The girl bowed her head honestly and went "S-Sorry!" What a nice and gentle girl. But it looks like you're currently found the wrong target for your gentleness.

Just as the girl had mentioned earlier, her skills in treatment were not particularly experienced. But compared to doing it herself, Oratorie found this much easier indeed.

"Okay, wrap the bandage tighter, it must be tight."

"Y-Yes. Uh—Is this okay?"

Thus, the treatment was basically done. Although some blood still seeped out through the bandage, it was many times better than earlier already.

So, now that the treatment is done, how should these two be dealt with?

(Although they didn't really bother me... Whatever, I guess I won't kill them. After all, she did do me a favor by treating my wound. Ufufu, I suppose this would be called a merciful heart.)

Secretly gloating to herself—

"Thank you, uh—Hina-chan, was it? Oh~ Even your name is quite similar to Hinai... Hmm, then I guess I'll be off."

"Ah, I'm called Sorashiro Hinata. He's Doumoto Ren-kun—Eh? W-Where are you going?"

"I have matters to attend to. A very important matter."

"N-No you can't! I don't know what you need to do, but you've suffered a severe injury! Ren-kun, you think so too, right?"

"Y-Yeah. At the very least, you should rest a bit first..."

That's really annoying—I guess I'll kill them after all.

Just as Oratorie was about to recklessly withdraw her earlier decision, she suddenly thought of asking about that important matter. With so much time ticking by already, the boy was probably no longer in that classroom. That meant she would need to search for him within the school again... Like finding a needle in a haystack.

(He probably escaped already, right? Then I'll need to find him in the crowd again, what a pain. Besides, running around and tiring out this leg would be a bad idea. Hmm, before I recover sufficient energy to battle, it's best that I avoid wasting stamina on walking as much as possible.)

Then what should she do now? After pondering a bit, she immediately came up with an idea.

Oratorie turned around and returned to the chair. The girl exhaled in relief and said "You finally agree to rest, huh."

"So... Let's be honest here, do you... find me strange?"

"Eh? Well~ Just a bit... Because you're wearing a swimsuit and holding a bloodstained... oar. But then again~ Today is the cultural festival after all, you're probably someone involved in some kind of event? Did you end up getting injured accidentally?"

"Hmm~ Good girl. Ufufufu, or perhaps you are a Japanese whose mind has been brainwashed by peace? But whatever... Ah, I just remembered something very important. Could you get me some water?"

Seeing the water faucet in a corner of the room, Oratorie requested. The girl answered "Understood!" and rushed over there. Thinking "the school physician probably drinks coffee, right?", she grabbed a nearby mug and returned with it filled with water.

Smiling and saying "thank you," Oratorie took the mug and—

Poured the water over her head.

"Eh, what are you doing?"

"Phew... Nothing much. It's just that if I don't do this, I'll die."

Oratorie continued explaining to the shocked girl:

"Looks like you don't understand. Me... I'm different from you lot. Including my way of life and motivation behind my actions. I'm not gentle like you, nor a busybody like you, neither am I some kind of goody good girl. In other words—"

Oratorie cast her glance to the other side. Sitting on the bed, the boy was inclining his head in puzzlement like the girl.

"In other words—Ufufu, I am a villain. For example, I am so bad that I will do this."

The woman swung the wooden oar with one hand. Just as the oar was about to bury itself into soft flesh, she suddenly stopped.

"...Eh?"

Then Oratorie held the cursed tool and pressed it against the cute little pet who was still blinking in puzzlement—against the boy's throat, and said to the girl:

"I hope you will help me find out where a student called Haruaki Yachi can be found~ If you dare say 'no,' I'll obviously do something to this cute little boy—You probably don't want to see that happen, do you? Let me ask you, whenever you see someone in need, you can't resist helping, isn't that right?"

Part 3

"Ah! Are you okay? Is it really true that you were attacked? How dare she try to kill Haruaki-kun, where is that good-for-nothing who deserves eternal damnation? I will personally go finish her off right now and make her emit unimaginable screams!"

This was the first preliminary report. As soon as Haruaki and Kirika entered the superintendent's office, Konoha approached with an intimidating aura. Although Haruaki knew she was very worried about him, it really was a terrifying sight. Konoha was exuding airs as though anyone who touched her would be chopped apart.

Perhaps because she heard from Konoha already, Fear was sitting anxiously on the sofa, turning her Rubik's cube while gazing at Haruaki with terrifying eyes:

"Seriously, I never expected all this trouble to pop up all at once. Why does the enemy want to hunt down the shameless brat... I really don't get it. Didn't someone say she's from the Family? Since I'm the one who killed Abyss, wouldn't it be fine if they targeted me instead, right?"

"No, that's not good either..."

"Anyway, Kirika, are you okay? It's you who saved Haruaki, right?"

The hand touching Haruaki's back only moved up and down slightly. Kirika probably shrugged?

"I didn't really do anything major. Perhaps on a whim, that man and his subordinate protected us carefully."

"I don't really understand what's going on, but it's quite worrisome that someone is out for your life... Is there anything I could do to help?"

Zenon frowned and asked. She was currently marking up and adding notes to the map spread out on the desk, the same as what she was doing when Haruaki entered the room.

Listening with her back towards Zenon, Konoha brought her face close to Haruaki.

"I am very thankful for your consideration, Zenon-san, but I will take care of that despicable enemy, so don't you worry! Okay, let's go! We're setting off now! Instantly!"

"I'm not letting you hog the spotlight on your own. If someone wants to kill the shameless brat, I can't stand back either. Also for hurting Kirika, proper payback is required for sure...!"

"N-No, wait up! Wait~ up!"

Haruaki frantically reached out his hands to stop Konoha who seemed to have entered her combat mode already and Fear who had stood up from the sofa. Then he sighed deeply:

"...What we need to handle right now is not this matter, okay?"

Oratorie's incident needed to be resolved, yes, but there were more pressing things to be done. These two girls should be very clear on that.

"B-But... Haruaki-kun."

Konoha's eyes flashed unhappily.

"We have a time limit. If she manages to run away again when we try to subdue her, it'll be a total waste of time. It should be fine to leave her alone for now... We must hurry and finish what we need to do first. One final push and the search for all the dolls should be complete, right?"

Haruaki looked towards the map. Marked red—were the many places they had already searched. Indeed, all it required was one final push to finish things. Getting off track would be unacceptable at this time.

Konoha looked quite reluctant but Fear reacted differently.

"Although I can't accept it completely—You're very right. No matter what, we absolutely cannot let the bomb explode. I must find it at all costs...! No matter what!"

Fear currently displayed an expression of determination. Her eyes had never been more determined than right now. Even Haruaki could not help but feel frightened at the sight.

"If focusing on the bomb is what's right, I'll return to the search. To be honest, there's no time to be doing this kind of thing here right now."

Fear returned the Rubik's cube back to her pocket. Slightly bowing her head, but maintaining her eyes of firm resolve, she walked out of the room.

"Haruaki-kun..."

"I said I'm fine already. Fear is right, let's go."

This was all they could do at this point. Haruaki smiled at Konoha, asking her "not to worry," then turned and left the superintendent's office with Kirika.

After parting ways with Konoha who sighed many times, Haruaki began to make his way through the school building's corridor. At this moment, Haruaki noticed a familiar face among the students brushing past his shoulder.

"...!"

It was Shiraho. She also noticed Haruaki and Kirika in turn and frowned. For a face to face reaction, it was surprisingly mild... Speaking of which, Haruaki noticed that whenever they met, Shiraho never seemed happy. Not even once.

But there was a significant difference from her usual reaction. Most easy to tell of all—

She seemed more unhappy than usual.

"..."

"Ouch!"

Just as they passed by each other, Shiraho silently kicked Haruaki on the shin. It was a sneak attack that one would commonly find occurring under a table.

Ignoring Haruaki who suddenly crouched down in pain, Shiraho went "Hmph" and quickly left the scene.

Trembling all over as he endured the pain, Haruaki heard voices from the boys nearby talking. They were probably her classmates.

"Oh my god, why would Sakuramairi-san enter that mode? Not only is her intimidating aura more acute than usual, but there's also a subtle change in her hairstyle... Looks like the cultural festival really is a special day, we got to see something really awesome!"

"Getting kicked just for brushing past her! Damn it, who is that bastard? I'm so jealous of him!"

"I super want to be kicked by her too! Even if I end up with broken bones, I have no complaints!"

During the sports festival, Haruaki had also wondered if the boys in her class had been brainwashed. Thinking to himself, he rubbed his shin as he stood up. Looking back, he could no longer see any signs of Shiraho, but he saw Kirika shrugging her shoulders:

"Yachi, just for the sake of future reference, I'd better ask as a matter of principle. Perhaps, are you actually happy about getting kicked by her?"

"H-How could that possibly be true? Please give me a break, Class Rep."

"Just kidding. I simply find it very strange for a boy to remain silent when suddenly kicked by a girl."

Well, I guess I was too occupied to complain, or rather, the mood back then did not allow me to complain?

As the pair continued walking again, Haruaki helplessly slumped his shoulders and muttered emphatically:

"...Just think of it as me, counting my blessings for the fact that no bones were broken."

Part 4

Not long after casually handling the mascot hero and leaving the calligraphy classroom—

Two people were back on the roof where the game had started, leaning against the fencing, shoulder to shoulder. Un Izoey gazed blankly at the sky while Pakuaki slowly chewed on his CalorieMate biscuits.

"...Un Izoey, won't you catch a cold like that?"

"My answer: the question seems unclear in meaning."

"You're wearing a lab coat that exposes your navel. That said, I have no intention of commenting on your personal tastes in fashion."

"The navel is the pathway that connects to the energies of the land, hence my answer: there is no need to hide it."

"I see. The beliefs of your tribe still intrigue me to this day."

Saying that, Pakuaki took up his pen and swiftly wrote in the notebook hanging in front of his chest. Then he glanced at his watch and said:

"It's this late already? Then Fear-in-Cube should be getting anxious now... It's time for us to go."

"The 50th one?"

"Doesn't matter anymore. Just leave it around here, how's that?"

Thinking "I have no idea where to place it even if you want it in this area," Un Izoey took out the doll from her lab coat's pocket and swiveled her head to check all directions. Her gaze suddenly settled on the area behind the school building, down below.

"—My discovery: reporting a dog."

"You like dogs? Well, for your people, those are hunting companions, right? Hoho, then how about giving it a present to express your gratitude? After all, it's just a useless toy, it'd be nice to let the dog take it away and bury it along with other treasures."

"Affirmative."

Hence, Un Izoey tossed the doll. Flying over the fencing, it landed right in front of the stray dog—or perhaps one that lost sight of its owner—that was wandering lost behind the school. With a quizzical look, the dog first sniffed the doll to make sure there were no problems before sinking its teeth into the doll and going merrily on its way.

"Lab Chief was successfully eaten by the dog."

"C-Could you not say something like that with such a straight face? I think you need to add the word 'doll' to your statement... Besides, the dog hasn't swallowed it."

"That would be a highly challenging challenge."

Smiling wryly towards the dark-skinned girl whose was cocking her head, Pakuaki spread his arms lightly.

"So, Un Izoey, prepare for the end. Next begins the meaning of our existence, the beginning of our desire. The beginning of a singleminded desire that is unshakable like the moving parts of a machine. Do you know what that is?"

The gray hair swayed lightly as innocent eyes stared at Pakuaki. Indeed, she was very innocent. Perhaps just as innocent as him.

"—Desire to know."

"Indeed, the desire to know, it's the desire to know! Truly and very correct! Although your Japanese isn't very fluent, you are completely correct, resembling a member of the Lab Chief's Nation more than anyone else. Precisely because the past world you lived in was so narrow, you understand that the world is full of unknowns. Hence, you are more honest and greedy than anyone else, especially towards the pinnacle of incomprehensible unknowns—«Curses»."

Originating from a completely different starting point yet walking along the same path, the comrade nodded to express agreement.

"Well then, let's use a researcher's honesty and a warring nation's greed to destroy one of the unknowns in this world. Conquering a trivial and meaningless unknown to make it a trivial and meaningless known fact. That wil definitely be interesting. So, let us set off with enthusiasm—to welcome Fear-in-Cube."

The Lab Chief needs to look like a Lab Chief, so let me exhibit my dignity on occasion—thinking that, Pakuaki solemnly proclaimed their departure. However, things did not go as well as planned.

In the next second, Pakuaki was sent flying by a kick from Un Izoey.

Because the mysterious mascot had appeared on the roof and launched a sneak attack against them once again.

Part 5

—Memories of one millimeter, she recalled them.

Entire families committing suicide due to poverty was a common thing. Having survived that kind of tragedy, Kururi was unwanted among her relatives. Hence, she was entrusted to be raised by the similarly unwanted uncle.

The uncle was a freak and completely unworthy of being called human. Kururi was often beaten by him.

After roughly one year of adoption, he suddenly dragged her into an empty room in the house one day. The uncle was carrying a chair, a ruler, packing tape and a kitchen cleaver.

She thought "I'm gonna be killed" but was powerless to resist.

The uncle asked her to stand at the edge of the room. Once she reached the spot, the uncle continued speaking.

Smile.

Although she had long forgotten how to smile, she still forced her face to distort and squeezed out a smile as he ordered. Instead of approaching her, the uncle moved slightly away and for some reason, started marking lines on the floorboards with the packing tape. Then he turned the chair around and sat on it. Next, he simply stared at her. His chin resting against the back of the chair, he swung the cleaver, his empty gaze staring at the twisted face of the elementary schooler niece who was displaying something that could not be called a smile. Then after a few dozen minutes, he said "That's enough" and left the room.

The same thing happened the next day, except with one difference. The uncle used his ruler to measure out one millimeter accurately, then stuck a piece of tape on the floor and moved the chair by merely a millimeter. Then sitting there, he held the cleaver as he stared at his niece's undeveloped body and artificial smile.

Same for the next day. Same for the next day after that. Same for the day after the day after the day after the day after that.

One millimeter. One millimeter. One millimeter by one millimeter by one millimeter by one millimeter by one millimeter, the uncle slowly moved closer.

The torture of one millimeter. When the remaining distance shrunk to zero, what was going to happen? Kururi had no idea. Completely no idea. Will she be killed? Will she be violated? Or will there be some other terrifying behavior?

Under such unknown conditions, under such unknown conditions, under such unknown conditions, the millimeters continued to add up, one at a time. Kururi simply smiled and stared at that one millimeter, the same way her uncle was staring at her face. That one millimeter was everything to her. Her world, her life, her fear, her uncle, her future, her past, her mother who had clicked her tongue in disdain at Kururi who survived alone. There was probably no one else in the world who would stare at one millimeter like her, right? There was probably no one who would squander her entire existence in this continual staring, right?

Indeed. Hence, hence she—

More than anyone else in this world, she understood this distance of a millimeter.

The foot turned and moved with the knife as though they were one. A high-speed counterattack performed while evading Kururi's strike. Using the "distance" she understood, Kururi saw her opponent's movements clearly while feeling the mascot costume's surface getting shaved off, at the same time steadyng her own steps—However, the dark-skinned girl's movements were too extraordinary. Her head was not located where one would expect a head, her torso was not located where one would expect a torso, while the knife held in her foot flew from outrageous directions. Although Kururi barely managed to evade, landing a hit with her own knife was proving to be an impossible challenge.

Whenever a slight distance opened up between the two combatants, the girl's left leg would suddenly extend.

The leg that was not wielding the knife. But instead, Kururi could see something resembling a string that stretched from between the big toe and the second toe.

No, it was—a bowstring.

Kururi only noticed it because the hand-cuffed girl flipped her own skirt up and took out countless short darts from the holder hidden beneath.

Placing a dart on the bowstring that seemed to be made of rubber, she pulled using her cuffed hands. Kururi stared wide-eyed at the bowstring's exceptional elasticity as well as the abnormal leg strength that could withstand that force.

—Shot out.

She did not seem to care whether she would lose balance but simply moved herself virtually by feeling alone. The dart missed Kururi's face by four millimeters but the shooter did not show any disappointment in her failure.

"Lab Chief, please give orders."

"Yeah, I guess we really are this hero's targets... Whatever, let's just escape for now. After all, a higher priority unknown is waiting."

"Affirmative."

The man suddenly disappeared without trace. Then the girl leapt over the roof fencing as though bouncing off the floor.

Of course, Kururi had no choice but to give chase. If she lost them now, she would have to start all over again.

Then—She must find out no matter what.

As she began chasing after those two, she thought "But..." to herself.

She originally thought a sneak attack might work but it did not. That girl was completely flawless and without openings. In that case, it was necessary to rely on advantage in numbers—But cooperating with Oratorie ended up in failure. Had they attacked in full force in concert, the result might have been different. However, that woman only cared about her own goal, thus leading to her demise. Not only did she get herself injured, but she also rendered Kururi's efforts pointless. Trying to help that woman by

suppressing the displeasure of seeing her past self became totally unnecessary. Kururi wanted to vomit simply at the memory of the way the woman looked as she pummeled the girl with the belt.

Oratorie could not be used anymore but Kururi needed manpower. Then what should she do—

In response to this problem, she immediately found a simple answer.

Just make use of those people.

The problem was that they probably would not help even if she asked them honestly—

(It doesn't matter even if they don't agree to help. I just need to use them one-sidedly through a baiting approach... But how should I create that chance?)

There was no time to worry over such matters. As long as she stayed close and observed their situation, some sort of method would just present itself. In the end, it was necessary to stop pursuing those people from the Lab Chief's Nation.

Kururi went over the fence and grabbed the drainpipe. Then using it as support, she slid towards the ground in one go.

Part 6

Oratorie watched the infirmary's locked door but the girl still had not returned. The door shook many times, probably due to emergency patients or people with injuries seeking help, but she ignored them all as irrelevant.

(Seriously... Could she hurry up a bit? I'm really going to do it.)

Impatiently, Oratorie chewed Pocky. Apart from that, there were candies and beef jerky on the desk. These were originally snacks that were hidden in the drawers. Apparently, this school physician was not a very serious person. There was also a cellphone that probably belonged to this school physician, vibrating noisily many times. However, Oratorie had no choice but to ignore it.

Suddenly, Oratorie discovered that the hostage on the bed—the boy—was sneaking glances at her. He was probably as weak as he looked. Once he became a hostage, all he did was cower and shrink like that.

His gaze was stimulating Oratorie's sadistic heart. Tired of waiting around, she decided to talk to him for a bit.

"Hmm, so this must be so-called killing time."

"...Eh?"

"Like I said, killing time. By the way, 'this must be so-called' is just a catchphrase of mine, don't mind it. According to my friend who taught me Japanese, it's similar to a certain famous baseball player, right?"

"Oh... U-Umm, I think his catchphrase is actually 'one of those so-called' or something like that..."

"Isn't that close enough? By the way, you've been staring at this all along, right? You're bothered by this wooden oar?"

The boy went "sorry" and looked down, shrinking his shoulders even smaller. Oratorie stood up from the chair and sat down on the bed opposite to him. As she crossed her legs, perhaps embarrassed about the sight of the swimsuit exposed under the parka, the boy's neck shrank back even further. How adorable.

"Let me tell you then. This is a cursed oar. I had no idea about its origins when I first obtained it. It's only later when a friend helped me to investigate a similar legend somewhere and told me about it. It all started with a certain awful man, lowest of the low, who rowed his lover out to sea on a boat. Then he used this oar to beat his lover to death."

Then she added "for some unknown reason, however." In any case, it was probably a dispute over love or money, one or the other. Many problems have always existed in relationships between couples.

"But thrown into the sea along with this oar, the murder weapon, the woman was actually not dead. On the verge of death, she returned to the shore. Perhaps due to her unsteady footsteps, according to an eyewitness, she supported herself with this oar as she walked along the beach as though she were rowing a boat on dry land. Then the lover finally succeeded in taking her revenge on the man by using this very oar. Feeling despair towards life, the lover returned to the sea, walking as though she were rowing on dry land. That's supposedly the entire story. Say, Ren-kun, what do you think of this story?"

"...U-Umm... So tragic... This story..."

"Indeed indeed, that's what I thought too. Hence, the first time I heard this story, this was what I said: 'What a seriously irredeemable tragedy.' I don't know if it was the lover's personal resentment that held unprecedented horror? Or perhaps this oar was further used in other incidents? In any case, this oar became cursed. It can control the force digging into the ground—something like the penetration rate—In any case, in order to use that kind of power, the owner must keep their body soaking wet at all times to satisfy the curse, or else death results. So that's that."

Moving the oar, Oratorie placed the mug from the table onto it. Just like before, she brought it to her hand, took it and poured the water over her head. Although the wet hair clinging to her face was annoying, she found the boy's frightened expression even more amusing. Hence, she deliberately refrained from sweeping her hair back and drew near to his face.

"Currently, I'm fine so long as I refill the water at a rate of about once an hour. But the time interval gradually grows shorter and shorter. Also, seawater is much more effective than tap water. As soon as I recall that, I wonder if some day it might develop to the point where I'm forced to use only seawater. Hence, in the end, I might end up with a body that will die unless it is constantly bathed in seawater—In other words, I'll become like that lover in the story, obliged to return to the sea."

Oratorie spoke as she brought her body closer. The water droplets sliding off her hair dripped noisily on the smooth and tender skin on the boy's face that was like a girl's.

"So you understand now? I didn't make myself this way because of a fetish or insane tastes."

"A-Ah mm-hm... Y-Yeah, I get it..."

The expression he made as he looked from down to up, clenching his fists and curling his body in fear—Marvelous, simply too marvelous. Oratorie felt as though something she had long forgotten was slowly filling up her heart.

Just as she stuck out her tongue and licked her lips...

"Man—I'm so full. That's noodle bowls for you, they keep serving a new bowl to you without needing you to say anything, that's wonderful yet... I really ate until I could hardly walk. Who actually invented this walking

motion of only advancing by one meter at a time? I'm gonna sue him... But that's way too tiring too."

Suddenly, a voice was heard outside the infirmary door. It did not belong to the girl that Oratorie had sent out to search for her target. Next, the door began to creak and rattle.

"A nap is required when one feels lazy, yes, a nap—How odd, why can't I open this—? Did I even lock it in the first place?"

The voice sounded puzzled. Then came the sound of a key being inserted into the keyhole. Has the school physician returned? Oratorie decided that she would need to deal with the new arrival in a different manner compared to the boy and the girl. No matter how irresponsible a school physician, once she discovered a suspicious person holding a student as a hostage, she would surely report back to the school, right? Hence, there was no other choice.

I'll just have to kill her.

"Sheesh, couldn't they just install a fingerprint or retinal scanning system for me~? That'll make my life much easier... Eh, who are you—Woah!"

(She dodged it?)

Swinging the wooden oar, Oratorie frowned. She had neither held back nor was she careless. In principle, it was supposed to be an unavoidable ambush. Hence, Oratorie could not believe that the woman's head remained unharmed. On further examination, the woman had simply fallen backwards on her bottom in the corridor. Perhaps she slipped and fell from fright and coincidentally saved her own life. What a lucky woman.

However, the second strike was going to render that luck meaningless—Just as Oratorie gripped the oar hard, the woman smiled and stood up lazily:

"Haha, I get it, you're doing that, right? Hiding is pointless. You're planning on doing something nice with that boy in the back, right...? I am a very understanding and accommodating school physician. Normal occasions aside, on a special day like today, I'll give you two special permission just this once. If you're willing to clean up properly afterwards, I'll generously provide the infirmary for you healthy youngsters to engage in healthy activities. I won't tell anyone, please take your time and enjoy~"

"...Wha?"

Hearing such unexpected words, Oratorie halted her hand that was holding the oar up high. At the moment, the school physician patted her on the shoulder, smiled profoundly, turned around and prepared to leave.

"So, are you a foreign student? Soaking wet swimsuit play... That's worth remembering for future reference~"

Muttering to herself, walking at a lazy pace as though she were dragging her lab coat, she left for somewhere. Just as Oratorie wondered if she should give chase, another person arrived from the opposite direction—

"Excuse me..."

"Hmm? Hina-chan, have you found him?"

"No... Not yet, I'm sorry. Here's the progress report, I think more time is needed."

Speaking of which, Oratorie had probably ordered her to return and make a progress report even if her search had not bore fruit. Humans were truly forgetful creatures. Looks like I need to threaten this girl a bit to make sure she doesn't abandon this boy and escape, to make sure she doesn't forget that the boy's fate is firmly grasped in my hands.

"Umm, about Ren-kun..."

"I haven't done anything to him, but if you don't search carefully, I can't guarantee what might happen next."

"I-I'll go search, I'll search immediately! So please, I'm begging you, please don't do anything to Ren-kun!"

"In that case, please hurry and search... No, hold on. What is the school physician like as a person?"

Just as the girl prepared to run, she explained with puzzlement on her face: "a person as sloppy as an amoeba."

"...Oh, really? So it really was her. Then that's it... Okay, hurry and search, hurry and search!"

"I-I'm going!"

Oratorie returned to the infirmary only after the girl had disappeared out of sight. Then she locked the door again.

"Umm, what's the matter...?"

"Nothing, you just need to stay silent and act like an obedient hostage."

Oratorie sat down on the chair. That school physician was probably no concern—In other words, it was back to waiting.

However, impatience and anxiety would inevitably surface while waiting. I can't just wait here all this time, so let's hope she can locate him as quickly as possible. Hence—that's right, perhaps it might be necessary to encourage Hina-chan to take her search more seriously. In any case, if her search remained fruitless, she would be returning to make a progress report after a while.

"Fine, I'll give her another thirty minutes or so. Ufufufu."

Feeling the boy's doubtful gaze, Oratorie placed a stick of Pocky in her mouth but did not bite. Hence, the chocolate layer on top began to melt from the warmth of her tongue.

It was as though she were deliberately killing time by playing with that sweet flavor.

Part 7

This was the second progress report during the doll search, or perhaps the last progress report. Most likely there would not be a third progress report.

The time was already 4pm. Due to the gradual departure of visitors, the cultural festival's liveliness was slowly cooling down. But increasing in response were students running around yelling about discounts, trying their best to push unsold merchandise. In that sense, the school still maintained a lively and energetic atmosphere. The cultural festival was still underway. Even when 5pm arrived and people were supposed to start cleaning up, the festival would still continue, because after the cleanup was done, there was still an after party to be held in school. However—that would only happen if no major situation arose at 5pm.

"Why can't we find it!"

Fear roared angrily and hammered the table violently. She was so furious her shoulders were shaking. Filled with murderous intent, her eyes were glaring at the school map on the table. The solemn eyes she displayed during the previous progress report were probably complementary to her anxiety. And now, that anxiety was exploding.

"Fear..."

Haruaki placed his hand lightly on her shoulder. In actual fact, everyone was just as anxious. Similarly, everyone felt as though they were being crushed by a nauseating and ominous premonition, however—

"...Acting out in this place won't help at all."

"I know, of course I know that! But—"

Fear turned around forcefully, scattering her silver hair. This time, she reached her hand behind her and smacked the table again.

"How many dolls have we found, Zenon!?"

Disregarding Fear's rudeness in asking a question without making eye contact, the superintendent's secretary answered softly:

"—Forty-nine, Fear-sama."

"That's right, forty-nine! Don't you find it strange? Why can't the last one be found!? Logically speaking, there's no place left to search. That's what this map indicates!"

She was completely right. Every place on the school map had been marked as searched—In other words, the entire school had already been searched. Even places where the four of them could not enter had been taken care of by Zenon's side.

"Perhaps we should consider whether any of us might have missed it?"

"But that guy said 'They're all placed in conspicuous places you can find just by paying a little attention.' We're already searching so desperately, how could we have missed anything... But indeed, it's impossible to rule out that possibility."

Her hand still placed against Haruaki's back, Kirika answered Konoha's question.

On the other hand, Fear was clenching her fist so hard that cracking noises could be heard.

"That guy said there are fifty, so the final one must be the target doll. We must find it no matter what, absolutely—What are we gonna do if it explodes? What if other students are caught in the blast? This happy place will be filled with screams, filled with that smell of blood like the castle dungeon, with limbs and remains flying around like in that castle dungeon, filled with death like that castle dungeon—"

"Fear, don't just recall those annoying images! Let's go and search, we'll search all over again! I can't allow that kind of result to happen either!"

Just as Haruaki declared forcefully, Fear looked up. However, he saw in her eyes something different from her earlier anger, a flash that seemed as though she were afraid of something.

"Hmm... That's right, we must search. Yes, v-very likely, I missed a place, it must be that. So, we must search, I'm going...!"

"Hey wait up! Even if you search randomly—!"

Konoha reached out but Fear ran past her hand and rushed out of the superintendent's office as though she were fleeing. Konoha sighed and put down her hand.

"I understand how urgent she must feel, but the way she acted really doesn't look right."

"Because that girl sometimes falls into that kind of self-abusive mode..."

Konoha sighed as she spoke. Haruaki could sort of understand the reason.

In the past, Fear had been closer to "death" more than anyone else. Rather than death stemming from war but death was brought about under the most dismal of conditions, through unreasonable causes, merciless and cruel like nightmares, irredeemable.

These past events could not be forgotten. Even if she wanted to forget them, these memories remained.

Hence, as soon as she approached similar matters—She was prompted to remember. To remember the stench of death that she could not dispel from her cursed body.

Haruaki bit his lip and said:

"Staying here won't help. We must take action too."

"Let's pick places where it's more probable to miss things before we act. There's not much time left, hurry."

"That's... right, it's all we can do... Yeah."

Konoha and Kirika examined the map carefully. There was only one hour left. Clearly everything would be resolved by finding that one last doll. That was the only solution the entire team knew.

"Supposing, if we still haven't found it at the last second... I need to find a way to contact that guy. We absolutely can't have innocent students suffering."

"Ueno-san... I really don't want to hear something like that."

"That's right. You said you didn't want to return, right? So don't give up so easily."

Haruaki listened to Kirika behind him and felt the grip of her fingers tightening.

"...Sorry."

Indeed, that was the only solution the entire team knew.

If anyone knew some other solution, Haruaki really wished they could tell him. To prevent the bomb from exploding, to protect the students from suffering, to allow Kirika to stay at this school, safe and sound—That kind of secret trick.

Part 8

"My question: you want to know the secret trick?"

"...!?"

This happened soon after Fear restarted her search and arrived in the courtyard.

This voice came from behind as though the speaker had been waiting for her. Fear hastily looked back but could not see anyone. But it was not a hallucination, Fear really did hear someone speak.

"Un Izoey... You're that girl, right? Where are you?"

"Silently ignored that question. You want to know the secret trick?"

The nerves all over Fear's body were tense due to nervousness. She clutched the Rubik's cube in her pocket and answered:

"This so-called secret trick... What is it?"

"My answer: a request to be proposed. If you are willing to agree, then us—will give up forcing researcher Ueno Kirika's repatriation, also the doll's time bomb will stop."

"What...!"

Fear was speechless but she immediately squeezed out a voice and murmured towards the air:

"What kind of joke is this? How could there be something so attractive... What the heck kind of malicious scheme are you planning?"

"So-called truth: simple and elegant. You decide it's true or not."

Her voice was exceptionally calm and composed. Fear gritted her teeth without saying a word.

What on earth was going on? What on earth was going on?

If she agreed to their request, those two will give up on Kirika? Right, then, then—the still undiscovered doll will not explode? The students will not be harmed?

No, but one could not afford to be careless. That whatever request, perhaps... Indeed, for example, if it involved doing something to Haruaki, what should she do? That would be completely unacceptable.

"My added note: no harm will come to your friends or the students. Very small request."

Fear hesitated, she felt very hesitant. The surrounding students watched her with quizzical eyes as they passed by her. Who knew how many minutes she spent standing there staring into space; suddenly, Fear realized how precious those minutes were.

There was no time. Indeed, there was no time. Not even the time to ponder over this decision—

The students in the courtyard entered her view. They had not been blown apart. Their arms and legs had not been blasted into bits and scattered all over. Freshly spattered brains were not present. No one was crying while trying to pick up their internal organs. Neither was there anyone giggling while kissing their lover's shredded head—Currently, that time has not arrived yet.

She had hesitated for roughly 3600 seconds, that was all.

That number caused Fear to move her lips.

"The content of the request... I'll listen to it first."

"Yes, judo and kendo training hall please."

Then Fear did not hear any more voices. Exhaling, she began to run towards the judo and kendo training hall located in a corner of the school.

She arrived at a place that was roughly two circuits smaller than the gym. There were no events being held inside and no one could be seen in the surroundings. Naturally, this place had been locked up all day. Logically speaking, Zenon had searched here earlier but afterwards, someone trespassed and broke the lock on the entrance. Without taking her shoes off, Fear entered the training hall directly. The interior of the building was divided into the judo hall and the kendo hall. The two people were on the kendo side. They were, respectively, the dark-skinned girl and—

"Hi, you really came? I was thinking it would be uninteresting to go back to that roof, so I looked for a place where no one frequented. In the end, I could only find this place."

"Yamimagari... Pakuaki..."

Reflexively, Fear wanted to pounce but suppressed the impulse. Even if she did anything to these two right now, they probably would not reveal the final doll's location obediently.

"What's your request? What kind of deal do you plan on making with me?"

"Haha, you seem quite impatient, that makes things easier. Un Izoey, take that out."

Un Izoey proceeded to take out a certain object from the breast pocket of her lab coat. It was a small cylinder. Without the slightest mechanical hint to it, the cylinder looked rather plain and unfashionable.

Fear shifted slightly into a battle stance. See a tool that appeared in this kind of situation, she reminded herself not to get careless.

"There's not need to be so tensely on guard. This is a kaleidoscope. Do you know?"

"I don't know."

Pakuaki shrugged "Oh really?"

"Basically, it's a type of toy. Naturally, this is no ordinary toy. Inside the Lab Chief's Nation, this counts as a precious item. «Lab Chief's Room No.3»—It was originally called «The World Seen by Amelia Pitrelli»."

"...A cursed tool?"

"Indeed. The only toy possessed by Alicia who was imprisoned and persistently violated by her father from the day she was born until she died. She saw a world through this kaleidoscope and only the world in this kaleidoscope belonged to her. Looking into these everchanging patterns, she hallucinated an infinitely broad world. But after many things happened, this kaleidoscope mutated into showing vast and magnificent scenery that did not belong in this world. It produces pleasure and addiction surpassing that of narcotic drugs."

Fear scoffed and went "Hmph" nasally.

"What pleasure, isn't it just an ugly curse no matter what?"

"Indeed you are correct. Through prolonged viewing, the human user would eventually be sucked into this kaleidoscope and disappear. That is the world of Alicia Pitrelli... In other words, the hallucinatory space created from being devoured by her curse. In order to make use of that curse, I made some modifications to this Wathe."

"You said modifications?"

"Yes. Strictly speaking, this is no longer a toy because you won't see a beautiful pattern no matter how much you peer into it. However, the true nature of the curse... Namely, entry into the world inside—That's what I've modified it into. A very amazing power, right? Perhaps because the patterns are gone, the so-called world has shrunk to a very small size."

Pakuaki lightly tapped the kaleidoscope that Un Izoey had handed over.

"However, rather than modified, I think it would be more apt to describe it as suitably damaged. After all, you won't see any patterns no matter how hard you look, hence the addictive and pleasurable qualities are reduced without removing the curse completely. Apart from that, I've basically increased the safety level... In other words, while researching this Wathe, I was able to use it effectively. As for the name «Lab Chief's Room No.3»—it refers to the fact that it's a room that can be carried around personally."

Modified. Suitably damaged.

Although Fear could understand to some degree, simply the sound of those words made her feel terrified and repulsed.

"C-Could it be... You intend to toy with my body just like you did with that thing!?"

"Of course not. Although I would be interested, yes, my request is very simple. I have a special guest in this «Lab Chief's Room No.3» and there's something I'd like you to do together with this guest... Anyway, you two should meet first. It's probably faster to chat inside—Eh? Un Izoey, what's the matter?"

At this moment, Un Izoey suddenly turned her face to gaze at the kendo hall's window. Narrowing her eyes and staring in that direction for quite a while, she finally turned her face back.

"—Nothing much. My nerves overreacted, maybe."

"I hope it's that. So, Fear-in-Cube-kun, that's what's going on. If you'd like to listen to me, then please enter. I'll enter first and wait for you inside."

Pakuaki proceeded to stare at the kaleidoscope and ended up disappearing instantly. Last time when he disappeared from the roof, he probably used the kaleidoscope as well to seek refuge.

Standing in the same spot, Un Izoey presented the kaleidoscope towards Fear without saying a word. Unlike Kuroe's blank gaze, her eyes were icy-cold and completely emotionless.

Fear hesitated slightly for a moment. If she did not enter, there was no way for things to start. After all, the man had already gone inside, which meant that it was not dangerous to the extent of death on entry. Hence, Fear went "whatever" and stepped forward.

"Hmph, this kind of thing... Since you asked me to enter, I'll enter. So, how do I do it!?"

"Peer then think of going inside."

That was way too simple. Because the kaleidoscope had a hole on one side, Fear peered in from there.

But there was nothing to see except for darkness. Then just as she thought "Let me enter and have a look," in that very instant—

Her view changed.

There was a rectangular room. The ceiling glowed faintly, resulting in quite a clear view. No, that was not a ceiling but actually a mirror. A dark and unclear mirror which showed her own face looking down at herself. Upon further inspection, the floor underfoot and the two walls on the side were also mirrors, except that there was a carpet on the floor and wallpaper on the walls, hence it was not obvious. The seams shone with a mirror's brightness. Only behind her was there no wall, instead, it was occupied by darkness that resembled a black wall. Was that where she had passed through to enter this place?

—However, the problem was not behind but in front of her.

The room's situation was quite chaotic and even contained a large bookcase that would prompt someone to wonder "Even something this big can be brought inside?" Books and documents were sloppily inserted inside it. Apart from that, there were several chairs and a desk just as poorly managed as the bookcase. Considering the master of this venue, there were naturally objects such as a strange mask and tools that resembled some sort of ritual equipment. There were also many pieces of machinery of unknown purpose, large and small. Among them, one exception was a familiar device Fear had seen on television before, a proper video camera set up on a tripod.

—However, the problem was not this room but the person inside.

Pakuaki was here. Smiling, he gestured with an open palm as though he were introducing the person in the corner of the room.

"Here is the special guest, would you like to say hello first?"

The woman was wearing simple clothing similar to a hospital gown, its short hem exposing her legs beneath. Sitting on the ground, her long hair

was scattered all over the floor. Like Un Izoey, she was handcuffed, but in this case, the cuffs were fulfilling their intended purpose. The woman started to cry as soon as she saw Fear—

"A-Ahhh... I... was wrong! S-S-Sorry...!"

She was Alice Bivorio Basskreigh

"Okay, Fear-in-Cube-kun. Rather than a request from me, it would be better to say let's make a deal. Just as I said just now, it's very simple. Both simple and utterly simple, for you it would be effortless and easy. In other words—"

Then Pakuaki continued.

His expression was like an excited child who wanted to find out the answer to a riddle.

"—Could you please torture her?"

Chapter 4 - Music Festival / Painful Musical Movement Prompts Nostalgic Smile / "The best pain."

Part 1

"You—What rubbish are you talking about!?"

"Eh, you don't want to?"

Pakuaki was sitting on a chair backwards, his head inclined as he spoke. Fear glared furiously:

"Isn't that obvious? I—I—The only reason why I'm here is because I don't want to do that anymore!"

For lifting her curse.

For becoming more human.

Wanting neither to hurt anyone nor hear anyone's screams—

Fear felt that her feelings and the deep-rooted wish in her heart were being defiled.

Faced with Fear's fury, Pakuaki acted as though it did not concern him.

"In that case, I won't force you. But what a shame~ If only you'd do what I asked, it's a rare chance for me to give up on making Kirika come home with me. Then I'd use the remote control to stop the bomb's timer and tell you where the doll is located. After all, I won't see Kirika ever again so I'd like to have a proper farewell with her. Then next, accompanied by a "Boom!", who is going to get blown away? A boy or a girl?"

"...!"

How could such a person exist.

This man was truly the worst.

"I really don't understand. It's not like I'm asking you to torture your friends or your companions. This is the notorious 'First Matriarch' of the Bivorio Family—an enemy to you. All along, hasn't she been harming you and others? Moreover, I also know, weren't you following your own meaning of

existence, using your emulated form, your own torture tool, to open up holes in her abdomen? Hence, what's different now?"

Different, this was different. In terms of significance... Absolutely... Different.

Fear clenched her fist, but for some reason, could not voice her objections.

"Furthermore—That's what she hopes."

"What did... you say?"

Fear glanced at Bivorio but her return gaze was different from before, seeming extremely helpless, as though she were afraid of something, like she would be flattened by something, as if her body was going to be drawn and quartered. Her face was covered in tears.

"...Yes, please punish me for my heavy sins. I... was wrong..."

Her handcuffs clattered as they rubbed together. Bringing her hands, which were cuffed together, to her face, she rested her forehead against her fists like a praying saint.

"...Guilt... Guilt... The sense of guilt in my heart tells me this—Accept judgment and endure suffering. Ahhh... Ahhh... People, people, people who unfortunately became the foundation of my sins, sorry, please forgive me...!"

Fear held her breath and looked back at Pakuaki.

"What did you do to this woman? Answer me!"

"I didn't do anything. Perhaps it might be related to your destruction of «Narrow Narrow Abyss»?"

That incident—it was quite possible. If that cursed cross had originally taken something away, the disappearance of the curse could result in regaining it again.

Even so, this reaction was way too weird—Hence, Fear shifted her gaze towards Bivorio again.

Her face was five centimeters away or so.

"I beg you... I beg you... I beg you... I beg you... I beg you, please punish me! I have really sinned heavily! This sin not only cannot be forgiven, but is

also the retribution for cursing God, so... So, my body deserves to be gouged... Beaten... Abused! Ahhh... Ahhh!"

"Nwah!? W-Wait a minute! Calm down and don't come close! Don't grab onto me!"

"I beg you, please let me taste suffering! Please make me cry and scream loudly, please make me incontinent from pain, please remodel my stinking and ugly body, please make me experience such utter humiliation that I may never show myself in broad daylight ever again—Okay, hurry and do something to me... Anything, hurry... Hurry... Hurry... Hurry hurry hurry...!"

"S-Stop it!"

Fear felt bone-chilling terror and swung her arm with all her strength to get rid of Bivorio's grip—She ended up hitting Bivorio in the face accidentally. She was non-human, the other person was human. The strike ended up sending Bivorio collapsed on the floor, her long hair scattered messily.

"Oh no..."

Fear reflexively wanted to apologize but was taken aback by the sight. Bivorio was lying sprawled and unmoving, her naked legs sticking out from under the cloth that resembled a prisoner's uniform. Her cheek red and swollen, she looked up towards Fear—

"Ahhh... Aha... This... is it. So painful, this is the pain of deep sin... Please... Please hit me more. Hit me harder, torment me more, let me experience even more pain..."

She smiled like the Virgin Mary.

Fear could feel her own heart racing. Her own huffing and quickened breathing also sounded annoyingly loud.

"Just do it like that, do you understand now? Aren't you doing a favor by helping her fulfill her wish? Moreover, you do have reasons for doing so. Such as when Yachi Haruaki was abducted, you opened up holes in her abdomen. And now you have a reason for giving her new pain—She is the one who killed Tateoka Aiko, you know?"

Throb!

Fear felt her own heart beating again. The heart, one that she was not sure if it actually existed, was beating once again.

Fear recalled Aiko's face. Unmistakably, this was the woman who launched the knife into Aiko's chest.

The girl whose eyes were obscured by her bangs, her petite body flying collapsed on the soaking wet ground. Recalling these memories, Fear stared at Bivorio. While gazing at her, Fear posed a question to Pakuaki behind her:

"Why... Why do you want me to engage in that?"

His answer came rapidly.

"Do you really need to ask? Because I want to observe. I want to observe your torture tools, to see them in action according to their intended purpose. Of course, I will be recording it with a video camera."

So that was what the video camera was for? Pakuaki's excessive preparation made Fear burst out smiling.

Pakuaki was already telling her to hurry. Yes, there was no time left.

At this moment, Fear could hear nothing except the sound of her own breathing.

As well as Bivorio who now wanted nothing but self-punishment, pleading "Please let me suffer more pain" repeatedly.

Plus Pakuaki's soft mutterings, motivated by the desire to know, urging Fear to "Hurry up and make a decision."

This world in a mirror was very narrow. Looking up, Fear could see herself staring down, asking—

What should she do?

She could neither let the bomb explode nor allow Kirika to be taken away by Pakuaki. The way things looked right now, both monumental challenges could very well fail. However, currently presented before her eyes was a secret trick to solve all challenges.

What should she do?

—Then she made her decision.

Part 2

Thirty minutes have passed. Very well, I can't stand it anymore, my impatience has reached a critical point.

"I feel it's necessary to punish you."

"Eh... P-Punish?"

Sitting on the bed opposite to her, the boy curled up his body in surprise.

"Umm, by punish, do you mean... Why... We haven't done anything..."

"Exactly, because you haven't done anything. That girl is taking too long. So, I need to make her search more seriously... Let me state beforehand, I hate men. Do you know why?"

"No... No idea..."

Standing in front of the boy, Oratorie smiled, bent forward and looked him in the eye.

"Didn't I tell you about the origins of this oar? In fact, my situation was pretty similar. The only reason why I obtained it was because I was thrown overboard and drifting in the sea, thinking 'Ah~ Who would have thought I'd lose my life because a man betrayed me.' At the time, I was quite far from land amidst raging waves. If this oar hadn't drifted over to me, I would have perished without a doubt. This thing is my savior. A much better partner than the creatures called men... However, I think it's fun to inflict this kind of game-like punishment once in a while."

"G-Game?"

"That's right. You're actually quite lucky, for you get to be exempt from amputation-style direct punishments. That's owing to the tender smoothness of your skin, owing to the fact that you're a cute boy who resembles a petite girl so much... Even a man-hater like me wants to play with you. Therefore—"

The boy cocked his head in puzzlement. Oratorie's fingers, the ones that were holding the wooden oar, moved one after another as though she were doing finger exercises for a musical instrument. Then—

"I will slowly... slowly and gently, abuse you."

"...Eh?"

Oratorie ended up acting with speed completely contrary to her words. Swinging the oar straight down, accompanied by the sound of slicing wind, there was the sound of cloth ripping—Then a beat later, the sound of a button bouncing its way on the floor to a corner of the room.

"Hu... Ah...?"

"I forgot to remind you, weapons are weapons. I'd advise you not to act recklessly... Ufufufu, things would be over with a direct hit, then I won't be able to torment you any further."

Only now did the boy display a frightened expression as though he finally realized what was going on. Then with trembling eyes he looked at his own body. His shirt had already been split into two by the oar that swung past his body, exposing the pristine white skin underneath.

"Next is this, like this, there we go! Hey hey hey, you're going to bleed if you move!"

"Eeek...!"

This time there were two diagonal attacks, one from the right and one from the left. Slight sounds of friction could be heard as the oar brushed past his neck. Oratorie's target was the shirt collar, moving it to the extent that the entire shirt was sliding off his shoulders. Furthermore, a few strands of hair were severed and drifting in the air due to getting swept up in the oar's high-speed motion.

The frightened boy shrank back, bowing his head tearfully. Smart of him to do so, for if he moved recklessly, it would not be surprising to knock off an ear in such circumstances.

"Sob... Sob..."

"Sorry—It must be scary, yes—But what comes next will be even more fun and terrifying! Ufufufu!"

The boy's upper body was already entirely naked: a delicate neck, collarbones that did not resemble a boy's, a flat chest lacking in musculature, pink nipples, a navel so exquisite it seemed to be man-made, and a smooth and tender lower abdomen. On closer examination, one could see a faint, straight line wound of red swelling along the center of his body.

"Oh my oh my, the first attack brushed against you. If I did it again, it would look like this..."

She pressed the oar's tip against his skin and moved it back and forth along that trail of red swelling. For the boy, there was currently nothing more scary than this oar that was stained with the blood of many victims. He groaned as his body twitched once.

"Nngg... Ooh..."

"Oh dear, I'm sorry. Does it hurt?"

"Y-Yes... It hurts... a bit..."

"Ufufu, what about over here?

The oar moved horizontally across the boy's smooth chest. Savoring the soft sensation that resembled a de-shelled egg, she slid the oar's tip over the boy's body—

"Ah! Mmm... Ah... Ummm... P-Please, could you... stop..."

"Stopping means I can't punish you. How about this, does it hurt? Hey, does it hurt?"

"Mmm! Y-Yes, it... hurts. Ahhh... No... not there... A-Ahh!"

"Ufufufu, you sound so much like a girl. Looks like this really is your first time."

Oratorie brought her face close to his neck and whispered in his ear. As for her oar, naturally it was still moving because she wished to give him more pain, she proceeded to apply more force.

"Mmm... Ah... Ouch! Huff... No more, I can't take any more of this, stop..."

"The real show hasn't even started. This is punishment, you're not allowed to resist. Ufufufu."

Wanting to see more of his frightened expressions, Oratorie wished to inflict more pain. Next, she decided to target his lower body. She tried to tear apart his pants using the same method as before, but it proved rather challenging. Let's hope it only results in a trail of red.

Just as Oratorie was thinking "Let's go let's go, this is getting more and more fun," licking her lip as she stood up...

"U-Umm... Excuse me, I'm back."

Someone was knocking at the infirmary's door, earlier than expected.

"You found him—?"

"No, umm... I'm sorry, not yet..."

Oratorie clicked her tongue disapprovingly. Well then, I'll have to show off the process of this punishment to her. Only by letting this girl watch in person will she be punished.

Hence, Oratorie stood up from the bed and unlocked the door. Then she called the girl inside.

"I've waited a long time already. From this, I can only conclude that you have not searched seriously."

"H-How could you say that, I did search very thoroughly..."

"So, ufufufu, this is the so-called punishment. Do you want to have a look?"

Oratorie brought the girl by the bedside. As soon as she saw the boy's tragic state, she instantly froze on the spot. Panting heavily, the boy tried to pull his open shirt together in embarrassment.

Oratorie spoke to the back of the head of the girl who was possibly scared motionless:

"I was about to do something even worse. After that, although it's quite unfair to you, I will kill you both. Hence, until I have my happy fun, you must search desperately. Got that? If you get it, then hurry and return to your—"

The girl's time unfroze again. She took a deep breath, causing her shoulders to move up and down accordingly.

Next, Oratorie had expected the girl to simply turn around and look back at her, but instead, she walked over directly in a huff—

And aimed a slap towards the face.

"Hey!?"

Although her movements were very sudden, Oratorie could not possibly get caught by such an amateur attack, hence she moved her neck back and evaded.

What admirable courage. But what happened next was even more thought-provoking—Looking at the girl, only now did Oratorie realize that she looked different. The lively and chattering personality was completely gone without trace, leaving only a pair of eyes that burned extremely quietly with pure rage.

"Ahhh, seriously enough—I'm not entertaining this any further!"

She pulled off her glasses and dashed it to the floor by her feet. Completely unconcerned with the glasses' distorted frame, she glared viciously at Oratorie. Simply by removing the thick glasses, the impression she exuded was altered substantially. This was due to the exceptional beauty of her exquisite face, enough to surprise even a woman like Oratorie.

"...Sh-Shiraho... I-Is this really okay?"

The boy asked frantically, but in response, the girl simply glared straight at Oratorie.

"Yes, the act is over, Sovereignty. Even though we accepted a request, why must we tolerate things to this extent just for the sake of that human? To go so far as to tolerate someone playing with you like a toy? I cannot tolerate this no matter what. Indeed, I absolutely cannot tolerate this! Sovereignty, you too are to blame, why didn't you run away before the situation deteriorated to this point?"

"B-But, I was thinking it'd be more appropriate to tolerate until I couldn't stand it anymore."

"The issue here is that toleration has its limits! Seriously..."

In front of Oratorie who was still baffled by the situation, the girl took out her cellphone and contacted someone.



"—It's me. I am absolutely displeased now, hence the operation is terminated, human. You will come here immediately—What, the bomb still isn't found? Someone will die? That does not concern me. If you don't hurry over immediately, there will be two dead bodies here."

She ended the conversation curtly in an inexorably furious tone of voice.

Oratorie finally grasped the situation at hand.

"...You two were deceiving me?"

"Yes, indeed. If you thought I looked like a very enthusiastic, altruistic, innocent and gentle girl, then your eyes really are no better than blind, human. Wouldn't it be better to gouge those useless eyeballs that are getting in the way, so as to let woodpeckers make their home in those sockets? That would also be much more environmentally friendly."

"Your goal... was stalling for time, was it? Telling me you were searching for the boy, it was completely a lie too."

"To me it was a total waste of time. Especially on this rare occasion of the cultural festival."

Arms crossed before her chest, the girl arrogantly returned Oratorie's gaze. At this moment, Oratorie felt an urge to burst out in laughter.

"Ahaha... Amazing, I really fell for it. What painstaking arrangements, it must have been tough for you?"

"Indeed, very tough. All that human knows is how to send trouble along our way. He deserves to die."

"You really wasted a lot of my time. I have something I need to find out as soon as possible... So, I really can't forgive you two. It looks like I'll have to punish you well."

"What a coincidence, I cannot forgive you either. Because you have committed an absolutely unforgivable act, human."

The girl's glare suddenly became even sharper. Clearly the intimacy in the couple's relationship was no act.

"Judging from the way you speak, you're not human? I see, if you happen to be a transgender as amazing as the Patriarch, your confidence wouldn't come as a surprise."

"You are very right, but that applies not to me but the child behind me."

"Sh-Shiraho... Please don't say anything more, hurry and retreat behind me!"

The boy's shirt hem swayed as he caught her hand and made her step back behind him. The girl named Shiraho clutched his hand tightly as though declaring him "mine" and said:

"This child will now give you a sound beating. Prepare yourself to cry and beg for mercy."

"E-Eh~... I will try my best, b-but I don't really think that's possible. What I can do is stall for time until Haruaki and the others hurry over!"

The boy frantically shook the bag that he had grabbed at some point. Perhaps because it was not closed properly, the contents came tumbling and flying out as the bag struck the bed.

Those were superalloy robot figures and teddy bears—Dolls.

"Ahhhhh, however, no matter what, I must protect Shiraho here... I hold sovereignty over every doll. Those bearing visual semblance, listen and show proof of your worship—Obey!"

The instant the boy recited his lines solemnly, the dolls suddenly stood up and sprang into action. Solemnly, they even took out boxcutters and sculpting knives from the bag.

Oratorie gripped the oar tightly. Since they had already summoned her target, there was no need for her to go looking for him. While he was hurrying his way over, she could probably make the most of this time to thoroughly punish these two for deceiving her.

"Haha... Although our organization's stance is to offer love and protection to dear children like you, the Matriarch has never issued orders "forbidding combat with interlopers"... A transcender able to control dolls is quite amazing, so amazing that it gets me quite excited. Hence, once I break off your arms and legs, I'll play with you like a doll. This counts as one of the ways I show my love towards enemy Wathes!"

"Wa—! She's coming—! P-Please show mercy—!"

"You shouldn't speak like that to the enemy, Sovereignty. During times like these, you should say: 'Bring it on, swimsuit freak! Once you are defeated,

I will viciously flatten you under my foot. Why don't you hyperventilate in anticipation of that like a freak! Or I'm going to do it right now, so you'd better lie down flat and wait for me there!"

"Eh~ Isn't getting way ahead—!?"

The androgynous Wathe and the arrogant, outspoken girl.

Thinking that "rendering either one of them immobilized first would definitely be more fun," Oratorie raised her weapon and rushed right into the center of the doll army.

Part 3

«The World Seen by Alicia Pitrelli»—Inside this low-ceiling and restrictive space, a female voice was heard.

This voice was sometimes in pain, sometimes acute, sometimes murmuring softly—

Screaming.

The place was shrouded in nothing but pain, pain, pain and more pain.

Because she was the object created for this purpose. Apart from pain, she could not give birth to anything else.

"Mechanism No.21 hanging type, hook-claw form: «Spanish Spiders», Curse Calling!"

This torture apparatus was like a stage in a certain sense. A canopy. Pulleys for adjusting the lengths of chains. Four chains whose ends were each connected to two hooked claws as though for pinching something between them. As for what targets were possible, that would be totally obvious.

Flesh, bones, heads, ears, eyes, noses, breasts, buttocks.

But currently, they were being applied to shoulders and thighs. With the hooks clamped firmly to the bone, torn flesh would not fall off so easily.

Next, the chains connected to the hooks rattled as they hung the victim up while the hooks firmly held her body that was being pulled down by gravity, preventing her from falling no matter what. Next, the body was lifted like a marionette. From where the hooks were embedded deeply into the

shoulders and the thighs, the most familiar color in the world was seeping out.

"Ahhh... Guh, ahhh!"

Screams. Suspended in midair, the hooks would bury even deeper if she were to shake her body. Watching her trembling legs, Yamimagari Pakuaki gave off faint moans of pleasure from behind the video camera he had set up.

"I see I see, this is not bad at all. Let's prepare for the next one."

"...Mechanism No.18 stretching type, framing form: «The Duke of Exeter's Daughter», Curse Calling!"

The horizontally suspended body was now being hung up vertically. More accurately, it was being stretched by a rectangular outer frame. As she breathed out with sounds resembling moans, her joints also rattled noisily. Her body height was slowly suffering abuse. At this moment, a strange sound of "crish" was heard from somewhere as a viscous liquid slid down her thigh that was injured by the hooks, creeping over her kneecap, calf, ankle and toes as though licking her, finally dripping on the the floor to produce a crown-like shape.

"Mechanism No.7 thorn type, sitting form: «German Interrogation Chair», Curse Calling!"

Finally, the victim was allowed to sit down, but this icy-cold chair was covered with steel thorns. Chains restrained her arms and legs. Then a heavy iron ring was fastened around her neck. Despite the lightness of her body weight, the body still sank down in the chair, or rather, the thorns buried themselves into flesh.

"Guh... Ohhh... Ohhh! Arghh!"

Back, waist, inner thigh. The brightly colored dye, squeezed out from her entire back side like a waterfall, was starting to paint the black chair into a different color.

"Oh my oh my, this really is the best. Fear-in-Cube-kun, how are you feeling right now?"

Pakuaki smiled.

"Haha—the best, obviously."

She smiled too. Then she continued to torture.

Fear-in-Cube continued to carry out the torture.

Smiling as she continued to carry out torture that she had grown accustomed to a long time ago.

Part 4

"Kyawah—!?"

"Ah~ Sheesh, I still haven't dealt with you...!"

Sovereignty instinctively jumped from his original spot. As the oar struck, the bed was twisted out of shape and sent flying. Instantly, the bed blocked the view—Although it could be used as a shield, there was still no room for carelessness.

As expected, the oar's follow up attack penetrated the bed and approached, causing Sovereignty to hastily crouch down to dodge.

But dodging alone would not help very much, hence Sovereignty activated the rare, collector's version superalloy robot that was stolen from the action figures club (by Shiraho). Wielding a boxcutter, it slashed towards Oratorie's back.

"Get out of my way!"

As expected of a superalloy, the robot had survived many waves of attacks already. But this final strike broke it completely. No good, how many dolls were left...?

Suddenly, Sovereignty saw Shiraho desperately kicking the remains of the metal-framed bed that had just been blown away. Just as he thought "What is she doing?" to himself, the remains went "crack" and broke down even more.

"Sovereignty, can you use this?"

"Y-Yes I can! Thanks!"

Controlling the remains of the bed frame that could barely be considered humanoid, Sovereignty banked on its hardness and attacked the enemy. Regrettably, it was destroyed in a single attack. You're way too weak, Mr. Bed.

"Wow~ Even something like that can be controlled and moved... You two are really too troublesome. I guess I'll have to take out that girl first, ufufufu."

"N-No, you can't—!"

Frantically, Sovereignty sent the remaining dolls flying towards Oratorie, but it was a trap. Oratorie instantly jumped up high to dodge the dolls' attacks. Rowing her oar against the ceiling, she combined the force with the momentum of her vertical jump to attack Sovereignty.

Sensing danger, Sovereignty retreated but bumped his back against a table. There was no escape—!

Summoned back urgently, the dolls desperately hassled the oar. Having closed the distance in one go, Oratorie clicked her tongue but nonchalantly used her empty left hand to choke Sovereignty's throat. In the process of being lifted up, Sovereignty's back swept up the documents and other objects on the desk but still could not oppose Oratorie's strength. As the back of his head pressed against the glass window behind the desk, the entire window shattered loudly next.

"Ah, that really hurts..."

"Sovereignty!"

Sovereignty heard Shiraho's voice but could not see her face. With his head pushed backwards, all he could see were the desk's scattered documents, shattered glass as well as—the enemy's face.

Muttering "...«Tragedy Method»" to herself, Oratorie made the oar pass through the dolls then smacked them flying. She proceeded to lick her lips.

"Ufufu, okay~ Now everything's over."

"Damn it... Let go of Sovereignty!"

Looking over Oratorie's head, Sovereignty saw Shiraho beating her on the shoulder with a chair. However—

"Like I already said, you're very troublesome. I'll let you play with me later!"

"Kyah!"

Shiraho was easily sent flying by a casual swing of the oar. How terrifying. Sovereignty tried his hardest to suppress the ominous imagery surfacing in

his mind. Handle this slowly later, she should be fine for now—Probably. It must be so.

"Okay. I'm sorry, dear Wathe. I am supposed to treat a child like you with love, but you're really obstructing me too much... However, if you manage to survive this, I will be taking you with me. Say your prayers well."

The oar is swinging down. I can't dodge it. In order to control a doll, I must be able to see the doll.

(Ooh, where? Where? None... none? Within my field of view, is there any doll—)

In that instant, Sovereignty blinked in surprise.

Found it.

In terms of his upside-down view, it was outside the window where his head was.

Many things had flown outside from the table, such as documents, the box of Pocky, unfinished beef jerky, etc. Perhaps drawn by the aromas—

A dog was standing there in bewilderment, carrying a strange hero doll in its mouth.

"—Obey!"

"What?"

Sovereignty controlled the doll desperately, making it fly like a rocket, straight into Oratorie's face. Perhaps out of surprise, she slightly relaxed her grip on Sovereignty's throat. Seizing this opportunity, he shifted his head, causing the downwards swinging oar to strike the window frame violently not far away from his ear. That was dangerously close.

(B-But the next wave of attacks...)

Will I be able to dodge them? Was there a way to dodge? Cold sweat was breaking out all over his body.

Oratorie easily removed the doll from her face, took a deep breath and raised the oar again—

Just at this moment, Sovereignty saw something like a black belt entangling the oar.

"«Tragic Black River»!"

"You're really doing as you please...! But I won't allow you to commit any further atrocities!"

They made it. Although Kirika's belt instantly fell down because the oar phased through it, Konoha had already rushed into the deepest interior of the infirmary.

"Uwah, what a tragic scene...!"

Haruaki looked around the room and saw a pair of legs. Near the wall, a pair of well-proportioned legs extending from a flipped up skirt—

"...Shiraho-kun!"

"A-Are you okay!?"

Just as Haruaki and Kirika rushed over to speak to her, Shiraho slowly sat up. Apparently, nothing too severe had happened to her. She was only blown away intact.

"Nngghh... Ouch. That... swimsuit freak... Ah!"

She instantly pushed her skirt down. It was already too late for Haruaki to shift his gaze away. He found himself pierced by a gaze that he did not experience even during the Sovereignty incident. A gaze filled with murderous intent. However, Shiraho's face was blushing slightly in a rare moment.

"You saw it, didn't you? Human! I-I have never shown anyone apart from Sovereignty! You must take responsibility by dying! Immediately! Go and die immediately!"

"S-Sorry! It was an accident, an accident!"

"I can guarantee to you that it was an accident. However, your insignificant apology has aroused my killing intent as a fellow female. If I were a juror, I'd definitely reduce your points so low that you'd be equivalent to guilty."

"Even you, Class Rep, why are you talking like that... A-Anyway, now is not the time to be arguing about this!"

Haruaki turned his gaze towards Oratorie as though he were escaping. While Konoha battled the oar with her knife hand, Oratorie could be heard grumbling with a frown.

"Your knife hand cannot be penetrated, huh? It's the same every time, I really can't understand... Because it's bare-handed attack?"

Apparently, the oar could not phase through Konoha's knife hand. Even so, the tides of battle did not instantly shift in Konoha's favor.

"Whatever, you're a Wathe as well, right? Then again, your bust is truly magnificent... Once I render you immobile, I'll also target that body part with my love. Do note that I'm quite amazing."

"Oh~ really, it was the same last time... Are members of the Family all perverts and freaks?"

The karate chops continued to face off against the wooden oar. During this time, Sovereignty crawled along the ground and approached Haruaki's group—

"Wow~ We're saved... Eh, Shiraho Shiraho, are you okay?"

"I'm fine, apart from my chastity."

"Ch-Chastity?"

"In other words, I was visually violated. Sovereignty, the next enemy is this human. You may kill him."

"D-Didn't I apologize already...!?"

Shiraho was displeased to an unprecedented level. The accident just now had angered her. Naturally, making an unreasonable request of their assistance was also part of the reason.

Indeed, in order to eliminate the worry of Oratorie's attack and allow them to focus their attention on finding the dolls—Haruaki had asked Sovereignty and Shiraho to stall for time by hindering Oratorie's movements as much as possible.

Even if Pakuaki had not taunted her, as long as she remained in the school, the infirmary was the only place where her wound could be treated. Hence, Haruaki had concluded that Oratorie was highly likely to be there. Consequently, in consideration of "would it be possible to keep her pinned

down at that location," he had ended up asking Sovereignty and Shiraho for help.

One of the reasons was that it was very likely that Oratorie already knew what Konoha looked like. Hence, the instant Konoha visited the infirmary, they could very well end up in a fight. On the other hand, Shiraho's contact with the Family only lasted but an instant, hence there was a much lower chance of being recognized. That said, the probability was not zero so Haruaki asked them to disguise themselves. Shiraho was a genius in acting while Sovereignty could turn into a boy. Since Sovereignty had debuted in front of Bivorio as a maid, perhaps that shocking image would make the disguise even more effective—Those had been Haruaki's considerations.

Hence, these were the roles they played: Sovereignty would act the part of the guard who would stall for time as much as possible, even if his identity were seen though midway. As for Shiraho, she was responsible for using her acting skills to create a situation where Oratorie would be persuaded to rest while Shiraho searched on her behalf. The original plan was to have Shiraho proactively offer to search, but the hostage situation and other developments arose, turning out even more dangerous than expected.

In other words, uh, in order to make the plan work, I really did make many unreasonable demands of them.

"I seriously apologize to you two, but you really helped us out a lot."

"E-Ehehe—Really? I'm very happy we could help!"

"Then may I request something that I want as my reward? It starts with the letter 'd,' ends with 'e' and contains the letter 'i.' A three letter word. All you need to do is use yourself as a demonstration, a piece of cake, right?"

Sovereignty was scratching his head as he spoke in his seldom-displayed male form. On the other hand, Shiraho had her arms crossed before her chest, glaring with eyes as cold as permafrost. These two remained completely the same as usual.

However, the plan they were asked to execute could only control the situation from deteriorating—They could not help things get better. And currently, the situation was finally deteriorating.

Once again, they were stuck in a battle with Oratorie.

But the final bomb still had yet to be found.

Time was ticking away, one second, one minute at a time—

"Anyway, let me assist Konoha-kun, there's no time left."

Extending her belt, but still with one hand on Haruaki's shoulder, Kirika spoke.

"D-Directly like this? Wouldn't it be difficult to move around? But definitely, we need to help her... And it so happens that Fear is not around. Damn it, this really makes me want to buy a cheap cellphone for her to carry around next time!"

"Since we can't contact her, it can't be helped. There's no time, let's hurry and settle this."

Faced against such a troublesome enemy, could things really be settled so easily? Even with such a severe wound on her thigh, Oratorie still fought as though nothing had happened. This was due to the Family's insanity and fanaticism. Precisely because of that, Haruaki knew they had to avoid starting a fight recklessly—Were they facing a weaker enemy, they would have mobilized Sovereignty and Shiraho to look for the bomb and sent Konoha to the infirmary to defeat this woman directly.

However, Kirika's suggestion was the only solution in sight. Although Haruaki could not be certain if it would work, there was no choice but to do it—

Just as Haruaki made his decision and clenched his fists.

"Oh, so these are the so-called reinforcements?"

Someone jumped in through the broken window, prompting Konoha and Oratorie to distance themselves reflexively. However, Oratorie immediately frowned and said:

"What, it's the little miss helper? I remember you saying that our cooperative relationship had ended... Are you here to help me?"

"No, I have my own difficulties."

It was the knife-wielding skull mascot. Unlike the time back in the calligraphy classroom, he did not approach Oratorie this time. Naturally,

neither did he approach Konoha. Hence, a tense, three-way situation resulted.

In terms of positions, the intruder was closer to Haruaki's group than Konoha. Kirika pushed Haruaki behind her at this time and stepped forward. Does she really intend to fight while the two of them remained in close contact? That could cause many problems... Such as feeling someone's hip pressing against him through the uniform.

But the intruder threw a glance at Haruaki's side and muttered purposefully:

"Fear-in-Cube is at the kendo hall together with the gray-haired girl and the other man. Hurry!"

"____!?"

Just as Haruaki comprehended the message, the skull mascot rushed towards Oratorie without even glancing at Konoha.

"What are you doing...? Isn't your target that man?"

"I already said I have my difficulties! Also, from the very start—I dislike you very much!"

"Eh, actually I thought there was something not right about you from the beginning too! If you get in my way, I won't show any mercy!"

Water droplets flew everywhere from the oar's swinging motions. The mascot managed to dodge barely and made thrusts with the knife. While the dazzling exchange of blows was occurring, the pair somehow jumped out of the infirmary's window at some point, shifting the battlefield outside. Although it might be too late to say this, it really was a miracle that there were no students nearby.

"So what's going on now, Haruaki-kun?"

"I'm not too sure myself. Anyway, she told us that Fear is currently at the kendo hall with Pakuaki's group."

"H-How did that happen?"

Who knows, perhaps they're fighting right now? If that's the case, we'd better hurry over and help her.

"But the bomb problem still isn't resolved, arghh~ Damn it, what on earth should we do..."

"By the way, Yachi, you may find me absolutely ridiculous for asking this, but I must ask as a matter of principle. The doll on the floor over there, am I imagining things?"

Kirika pointed towards a battered and broken infirmary bed. Naturally, it was no illusion.

"What—!"

"Th-That's the doll that helped me in a crisis just now, although it was only for an instant."

"W-Where did you find it?"

"I don't know why, but a dog was carrying it."

"A dog?" Although Haruaki could not figure it out, it was not important at this moment. He frantically rushed forward and reached for it—

"Wait, Yachi, let me check it. If it's really the target doll, it would be very dangerous."

Saying that, Kirika cautiously picked up the doll and removed its head. Peering inside, she frowned for some reason. Then reaching slowly into the doll, she took out something.

"It's a key."

"You don't say! In other words, that's the target doll!"

"Indeed, but it's very strange."

"By strange, what exactly do you find strange?"

Next, Kirika inspected the entire doll even more carefully and answered Konoha's question.

"—There's no bomb installed inside."

"W-What's that supposed to mean?"

"I don't know. If everything was a lie, then setting this game up was completely meaningless. So basically, there's meaning behind making us play the game, but there was no need to have a real bomb, is that it? In

other words, it doesn't matter whether we find this doll or not... If that's the case, then ultimately—?"

Kirika's eyes flashed with surprise. Asking Haruaki's group to step back, she inserted the key into the collar and took it off.

"This smells fishy, Yachi. Very likely, that guy's goal is not bringing me back to the Lab Chief's Nation."

"Eh? Then why did he do all this... No way?"

Konoha's expression changed with alarm. Haruaki realized the same thing.

All it took was careful thinking about what those guys were doing and the answer became easily found.

The report, which they heard just now, would take on an entirely different meaning.

Glaring at the collar she had taken off, Kirika spoke resentfully:

"That guy's goal is probably Fear-kun, though I still have no idea what his ultimate intentions are."

Part 5

Inside the kendo hall, the girl was like a warrior, standing upright while exuding a cold and merciless aura. The dark-skinned girl was the only one visible with Pakuaki nowhere in sight.

Haruaki and Konoha had arrived along with Kirika whose collar had been taken off. The trio stared at Un Izoey tensely. Aware of the danger, they had not asked Sovereignty or Shiraho to accompany them.

"My suspicions: your knowing of this place."

"That's not important. Where is Fear! What are you people planning to do with her!?"

Un Izoey did not speak and simply put on the handcuffs beside her that she had taken off earlier. Then bending her right leg, she began to search inside her skirt. Once her dark-skinned foot touched the floor again, it was already wielding a knife. This was her answer.

"Haruaki-kun, you stay back. This girl looks like she wants people to force her to talk by force."

"I agree. That man's absence makes me very displeased—But I'm going to go all out now to compensate for the regrets I felt back when I was hindered by that weird collar."

Konoha narrowed her eyes as she stared through her glasses. On the other hand, Kirika extended her belt from her right sleeve.

Then they advanced slowly.

Un Izoey nimbly raised her foot up high. Instantly, Konoha attacked with a chop of her hand but she dodged. Then while turning her body, her foot shot out from below with the knife as a counterattack. Konoha responded with a sharp kick in kind but Un Izoey easily blocked that move as well. Immediately, Kirika's «Tragic Black River» attacked from the side. But despite Kirika's intentions to entangle her limbs, Un Izoey effortlessly severed the belt using the knife in her foot.

Clearly it was a two-on-one battle, but Un Izoey still remained calm and composed. Closing in slightly as though she were saying "It's my turn to attack," Un Izoey moved her unarmed left foot. As though performing a vigorous dance, she lowered her stance and kicked forcefully towards Konoha and Kirika with her left leg—

Then at this moment, the skull-masked mascot broke through the window and jumped into the kendo hall.

"...!"

The humanoid mascot brandished his knife at Un Izoey's back as he descended.

Jumping swiftly, Un Izoey engaged him in turn with the knife on her foot.

The two flew past each other.

Their blades produced the same result, namely, they slashed each other's body lightly.

Un Izoey's knife had torn through a large part of the mascot's face, but there was no bleeding. Either the costumed attacker had seen through her motions with millimeter level accuracy, or he was just plain lucky.

On the other hand, the attacker's knife slashed through Un Izoey's lab coat, as though he had specifically aimed for that spot. Only the lab coat's pocket was sliced open spectacularly, and along with it, a certain object inside was also chopped into two.

"...«The World»!"

Looking at the object fallen from her pocket, Un Izoey displayed anxiety for the first time and groaned softly.

Then in the next second—

Entities, which definitely did not exist inside the kendo dojo previously, suddenly appeared. Many entities, but for Haruaki, only one of them was very important.

"Where have you suddenly run off to, swift and agile heroine? What on earth are you planning...?"

First of all, Oratorie followed closely behind the humanoid mascot and jumped in through the broken window. Her eyes widened in surprise at the sight of something. However, that was not important for Haruaki.

Second of all, the kendo hall was suddenly filled with all sorts of objects. It looked as messy as an earthquake aftermath. There were countless books, fallen bookcases, tables, chairs, a video camera, etc etc. Nevertheless, these were not important for Haruaki either.

Third of all, after pushing various books and miscellaneous objects aside, Pakuaki stood up. He was surveying his surroundings with a touched expression while Un Izoey stood on guard by his side. They were unimportant for Haruaki as well.

Fourth of all, face covered in tears and helpless—Alice Bivorio Basskreigh. Handcuffed, she looked like a prisoner but her body was visibly unharmed. For Haruaki, she was not important either.

Fifth of all—Now that was the most important one.

To be honest, nothing else mattered the instant Haruaki recognized the sight. He could not comprehend, how did this come about? He could not figure it out at all, but she was definitely here.

That girl was currently using her own torture tool to hurt herself

Chapter 5 - Late Night Festival / She Does Not Wish to Know Right Now / "Enough unknown, unknown enough."

Part 1

In the beginning, Fear seemed to be oblivious of her situation.

"Haha... Ahhh~ This is the best and the worst. I... Can still take more... Bring it on..."

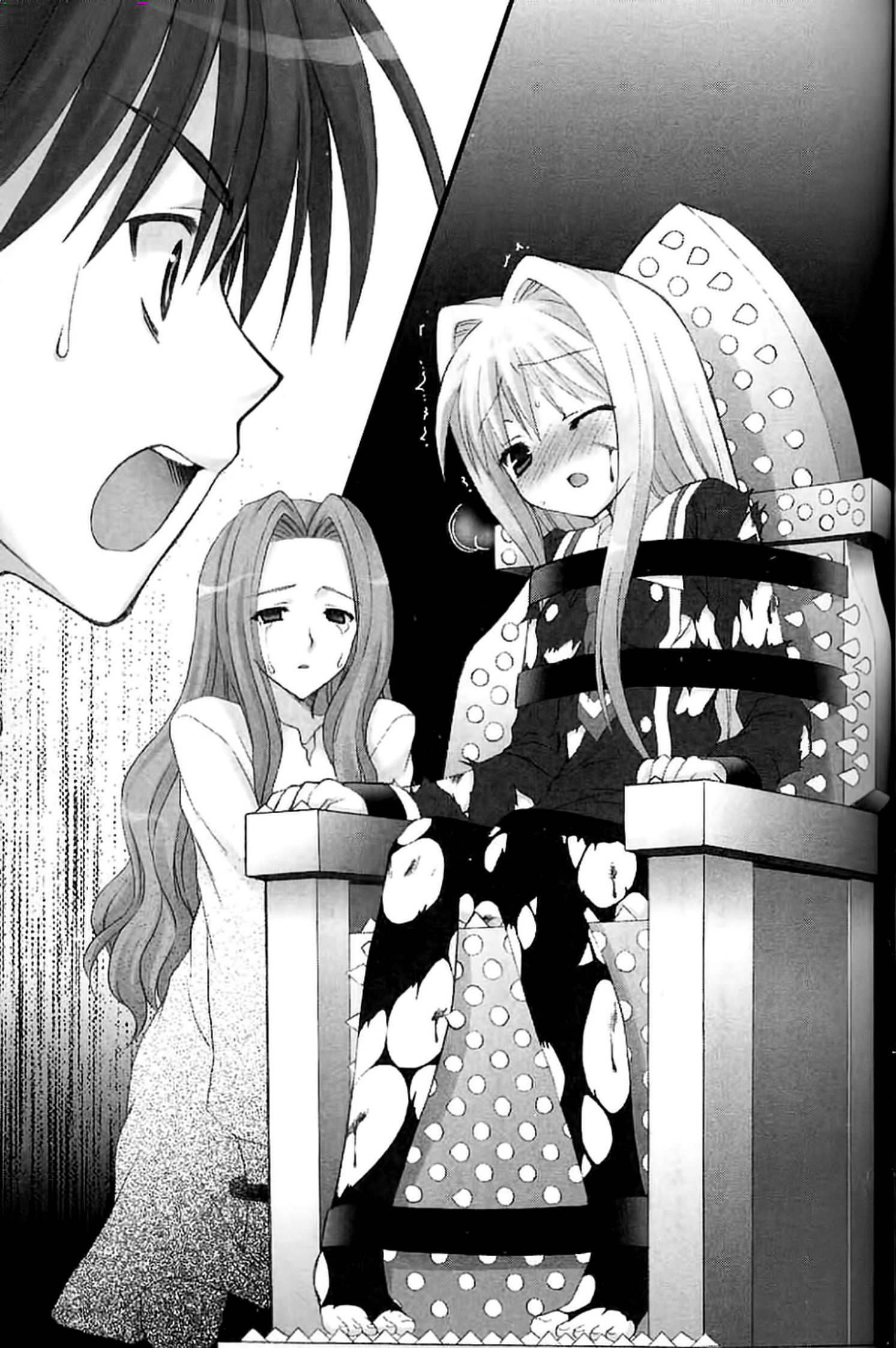
"Fear!"

Haruaki rushed forward. Sitting on the metal chair of thorns, Fear slowly turned her neck, her eyes gazing hazily towards him from beneath her silver hair. With that, Haruaki finally understood what was going on before his eyes. In the next second, the chair suddenly disappeared. The Rubik's cube fell and rolled on the floor, followed by Fear's petite body that fell with a thud.

Haruaki hastily picked her up in his arms, holding his breath as he saw the two colors exposed by her tattered uniform—the white of her skin and the red causing her pain respectively.

"You! How did it turn out... like this...!?"

"Ahhh... Haruaki... It's nothing really. My injuries are much more minor than they look. Not only did I hold back, but I also tensed my nerves to avoid wounding vitals... I'll be able to jump around energetically with a little rest. See, the bleeding is about to stop. Don't worry, I'm fine."



Then Fear raised two trembling fingers to make a victorious sign of "V" in order to indicate she was fine. Haruaki did not know whether she was trying to act tough or if she was telling the truth. In any case, there was no way to tell from sight, so just let it be.

"W-What I mean is how did this happen? That guy must have done something to you!"

"Mmm..."

"I'm asking you to tell me now! Tell me now!"

"...He wanted me to torture Bivorio—he wanted to see how torture tools were used in their intended function. If I did as told obediently, he will give up on Kirika and stop the bomb from exploding."

Haruaki was greatly shocked. To think Pakuaki would suggest that kind of deal. To think he would suggest such an utterly despicable deal.

"To be honest, I hesitated. But if I didn't do as told, innocent students could become victims once the bomb explodes. Apart from that, there's Kirika's matter. She would likely have to return to that guy's side. So I thought about trying it. Yes, that's right, for an instant, I really considered this: 'Bivorio is an enemy, so I'll just do as he suggests.'"

However—

Held in Haruaki's arms, Fear added these words and turned her neck lightly as though avoiding his gaze.

"But for some reason, your face suddenly surfaced in my mind. This made me feel that even though she is an enemy, if I really did it, you... Umm... Probably would become very sad. Although you're very shameless, you're very big on decency. It's not like I'm not aware of how much you've helped me, uh—Anyway, many times—"

"..."

"S-So, basically, I decided to do it this way. I said to that guy, if he wanted to see how torture tools are used, then it shouldn't matter whether the target was Bivorio or not... Hence, umm... It became like this..."

Ahhh, I get it now. Haruaki finally understood how things developed to this state.

Because Fear was acting too foolishly.

"...Didn't you consider what emotions my face might display if you did something like that?"

"I-I don't know."

Fear twisted her body again, turning her back towards Haruaki, trying to hide her face from him, trying not to see his face at the same time. To be honest, even Haruaki himself did not know the answer to his own question. Currently, what kind of face was he making?

"Didn't you consider what actions I might take?"

"M-Muu... What are you going to do...?"

Now Haruaki understood himself, hence he proceeded to do what he wanted to do.

First, he clenched his fist, straightened his elbow and raised his hand high. Then like a hammer, applying appropriate force—

He knocked hard on the silver head.

"...Niyuu!"

And again, knock!

"Nyo!"

Knock!

"Meowah!"

Fear made a strange sound like a cat as her body shook.

Haruaki prepared once more—Just as he swung his arm downwards, probably because she had finally reached the end of her patience, Fear turned back to face him and grabbed Haruaki's arm forcefully:

"W-What are you doing, I'll curse you! I never said you could do whatever you want, knocking someone else's head like mad... I've seen this on television before, it's called 'domestic violence'... or... whatever...?"

Fear's voice gradually grew quiet and finally diminished to nothing. Staring wide-eyed, she gazed straight at Haruaki. Ahhh~ Indeed, what sort of expression am I wearing right now?

"You're amazing for choosing not to torture someone else. But this kind of situation—it's not something I can accept, nor do I wish to see. I don't want to see you like this."

"Ah..."

Fear emitted something like a soft sigh then slowly released Haruaki's arm she had been gripping tightly. Bowing her head slightly, she shrank her shoulders and said:

"Umm... How should I put this... S-Sorr... Hnyowah—!"

Fear made a strange noise because Kirika suddenly hugged her tight while kneeling on the floor.

"...Sorry. Really, I'm very sorry. Fear-kun...! There's actually no need for you to do this kind of thing by yourself. Indeed, there's really no need for that. It's all my fault. Blame me and that man. Sorry..."

"Oh no, you don't need to apologize, Kirika. I didn't do it just for you, there's also the bomb. Weighing risks and benefits, I had no other choice but this."

"Fear-kun, y-you, how did you—"

"Uguu! If you hug me this tight, I can still feel some places hurting... Anyway, your collar is off now! D-Did you find the key? In that case, what about the bomb?"

While accepting Kirika's embrace, Fear's expression changed to surprise. Haruaki breathed a great sigh of relief. Judging from what he could see, Fear's earlier words were apparently not part of an effort to look tough, she probably had not suffered serious injuries... Logically speaking, the self-repair abilities of her kind should be able to handle it.

"The bomb problem is gone. Or rather, I should say that there was no bomb to begin with all along."

"W-What did you say, Cow Tits!?"

Gazing ahead with vigilance, Konoha spoke while standing. Literally, she was enveloped in a sharp aura that would slice someone open on the slightest touch.

"Most likely, his goal was to make a deal with you. In other words, from the very start, he prepared this game for the purpose of observing your torture

tools from close range. By deliberately inciting a sense of crisis, you were forced to believe that a deal was the only solution."

"W-What... If that's true, then everything I did was a total waste... Damn it, I can't forgive that! I absolutely cannot forgive that kind of thing...!"

Fear tried to stand up, but even if Haruaki tried to persuade her to remain still and rest, she probably would not listen. Hence, Haruaki grabbed her arm to help support her body, at least preventing her from falling over.

"Don't say that. You really did what I hoped you wouldn't, but... Saying it was a total waste would be too harsh."

"That's right, Fear-kun. Your actions were mistaken, indeed, but to me, there were more noble than anything else. I won't allow anyone to laugh at what you did for being meaningless. It was a noble and commendable—mistake."

Kirika spoke as she supported Fear's other arm. Her words were quite contradictory but very agreeable at the same time.

"Even so, you should still be angry, right? But now is precisely the opportunity for you to get angry. Let me state for the record, I am completely not angry... Why is that? Is it because my body's condition seems to be miraculously improved today? Even seeing the red liquid flowing from your body, I am still able to endure."

Konoha spoke calmly as usual but was using some round-about manner to hide the killing intent emanating from her body.

Then Haruaki's group glared at the same target—the silent gray-haired girl and the man who was looking around inquisitively.

"Wow~ So this is what happens when «The World Seen by Alicia Pitrelli» is destroyed? Interesting. But this seems to require further investigations. No, I believe this was actually quite dangerous, we could have disappeared into the curse like past users, devoured by an infinite hallucinatory space, or even sliced into halves ourselves... Fufu, to think when one unknown turns into something known, that ends up creating new unknowns. The mysteries in this world are truly too exciting! There is still far to go along the road to conquering unknowns. And no, I'm not just saying this to sound cool."

"You...! Why did you make her do that! Do you really want to see her powers that much!?"

Haruaki accused loudly, causing Pakuaki's wavering gaze to finally turn towards his direction. Smiling, he nodded and responded:

"Indeed. Weren't you listening to me? I want to know, want to know, desperately want to know! I want to know everything that's unknown! That's why I investigate as much as I can, that's all!"

Haruaki was prompted to recall what Kirika had told him while they were searching for the bomb. About the man who searched for unknowns as well as the genius who could not live without unknowns.

"If it doesn't involve any of these girls, I don't care, you can find as many unknowns as you want...!"

"That's right! I'm not your toy, stop adding to my troubles!"

"No, you are a toy."

Pakuaki instantly gave a simple response. Possibly because he sensed the dangerous aura hanging around Haruaki, he shrugged and said:

"Fear-in-Cube, you are a most intriguing toy. Currently speaking, you are very likely to be the 'best' toy. I'm really touched to be able to observe up close today. Thank you very very much... However, my interest in you has not ended. Just as I have investigated you all this time, I still want to continue investigating in the future. In any case, I must carefully analyze the data from today. Next, I should be able to find out many new things that were unknown in the past. About you."

"Hmph, what do you know about me?"

"Well... If my answer is: part of what you're supposed to know, as well as part of what you don't know... Does that count as a complete answer?"

"What kind of joke is that..."

Fear picked up the Rubik's cube by her feet. Haruaki originally wanted to ask her not to do anything rash but before he could speak, Pakuaki had already restrained her with his words:

"On the other hand, don't you care about what's happening not too far ahead of you? If you don't care, then I'm personally fine with it too."

Pakuaki's eyes motioned towards Bivorio who was sitting collapsed on the floor. She did not have her monocle or her nun's habit, but was still handcuffed. She was staring straight at Fear with her tear-covered face and confused eyes that displayed how lost she felt.

"Ahhh... Why won't you punish me who has sinned heavily...? Why won't you allow me to savor pain? Why won't you abuse me? Why won't you violate me? Why won't you destroy my dignity as a human and treat me like a rotten insect? Please hit like just now. Hit me viciously, like you would beat a filthy sow. Smack! Smack! Hitting..."

"W-What is the matter with her...?"

"No idea. According to that bastard there, it's probably the result of destroying Abyss."

Just as Fear answered Konoha, someone suddenly knelt down before Bivorio. No, not exactly. It was more like a subject kneeling before a king, or a believer accepting a saint's baptism—She was kneeling on both knees with her head bowed. The wet woman in a swimsuit with a parka on top.

At this moment, a slight glimmer of sanity returned to the eyes of Bivorio that were filled with her empty wishes of masochism.

"You are «Landfisher»... Oratorie Rabdulmunagh...?"

"It's been a while, Matriarch."

"You're still... alive... Thank goodness..."

Oratorie's eyes showed slight unease, perhaps in response to the sense of dissonance in Bivorio's words. However—

"I'm very sorry I wasn't able to follow your orders. Umm, I originally planned to kill as many members of the Lab Chief's Nation as possible and tried to go on a rampage using the «Tragedy Method» before detonating the bomb. However... I was careless and ended up imprisoned before I could even detonate the bomb. Then I managed to escape with great difficulty, and desperately searched for you, Matriarch—"

"Sob... Sorry..."

Bivorio wept once again, her body trembling even more intensely, acting like an ordinary girl.

Perhaps finding Bivorio's reaction too unusual, Oratorie straightened her upper body, slightly at a loss.

"W-What is with you, Matriarch? Please tell me what I should do next? I've been searching for you in order to find that out, taking action in order to locate you. If you want me to invade the Lab Chief's Nation with a bomb again, I will do so. Please let me do that. This is exactly what I can do as proof of my love for the transcendent partner who saved my life!"

"S-Sorry sorry sorry—! No, that's sin! That's sin... It is the sin I have forgotten until now! You don't need to do that sort of thing, you can't do that! If you did it, oh no~ The guilt will kill me! Even if I'm not punished, I'll die! That sort of thing, is definitely... unpardonable! Unpardonable to the point of being cursed!"

"W-What are you talking about...? You... are our... The Bivorio Family's Matriarch... No, wait, what about the Patriarch? Weren't you together? How's the Patriarch...?"

"Abyss is already dead."

The one who spoke this line was neither Bivorio nor someone in Haruaki's group.

Instead, it was someone who had suddenly started standing beside Bivorio and swung a knife forcefully to sever her handcuffs—The person in the mascot costume.

"I completely... can't understand... your meaning. Who on earth... are you...?"

Oratorie entered stance lightly as she spoke. However, the mascot did not even look at her. Furthermore, finding the mask that Un Izoey had destroyed to be a hindrance, the person pulled it off.

Haruaki remembered her. The unmasked person was very familiar. The knife-wielding, exceptionally agile, skilled in seeing through attacks, even managing to astound Konoha, that girl—

She was Nikaidou Kururi. Like Bivorio, she was a member of the Family who had disappeared without trace after the sports festival incident.

—Was she still a member of the Family? Haruaki had heard from Fear about how Abyss' destruction came about. Kururi had betrayed the family and buried her knife deep into Abyss' body.

"Kururi... -san...?"

"Should I say hello again? Hmph, that would sound so incompetent."

Her expression did not relax at all. She even muttered resentfully. Then casting a glance towards Oratorie, Kururi said:

"I was once a newly recruited member of the Family. Let me re-introduce myself—Nice to meet you, my senior."

"...I remember earlier, Hinai mentioned something about recruiting a master knife user in this country. But I don't really get it, if you're neither a helper nor a true member of the Family, why did you dress up in such a strange manner? Also, why did you suddenly start foiling my plans?"

"Like you, I've been searching for this person."

Kururi glanced at Bivorio.

"Just like you, I have many things I want to find out, but I didn't know where she was. All I saw was that man taking her away. So I decided to find him, but my only clue was this school where she was taken away from—"

"Hmm, I get it now. Let me outline my deductions then—Seeing this cultural festival, you wondered if that bastard would invade the school and make another appearance. But if we discovered you, things would get complicated, which is why you needed to hide your face—At that moment, you came across an air-headed girl who was snoring away with a mascot costume beside her. That's how everything happened!"

Fear proudly announced her exceedingly simple deductions. Kururi looked at her and went "Ha" in a smile.

"Your answer is correct, Fear-in-Cube. Yet you remain noisy and incompetent."

"Guuu, you're the girl who remains infuriating!"

Fear bared her fangs and threatened. Haruaki marveled at how quickly she had recovered. There was nothing more worth being thankful for at the moment. However, wasn't Fear acting too energetic?

Kururi then shrugged and indifferently explained what had happened afterwards. Such as overhearing Pakuaki and Fear's conversation and guessing that Bivorio was in the kaleidoscope; how she no longer wanted

to help Oratorie but made use of Haruaki's group instead; after handling Oratorie to allow Haruaki's group to leave, she escaped here while fighting Oratorie at the same time, etc.

"Oh—I still don't quite get it... So, in the end, what goal are you pursuing... Rather, the most important issue here is the Matriarch's unusual state. No no, hold on! You just said something that I can't ignore even if it were a joke—"

"Then let me repeat myself. I killed Abyss. He's already shattered into pieces."

Fear unhappily grumbled: "No wait, I dealt the fatal blow—" but Haruaki ignored her for now. His attention would be better focused on the dialogue between the two members of the Family that was causing a sinister atmosphere to rise.

"As for the reason, there are all sorts. Such as: I was bored, he deceived me for so long, I found the Family incompetent, he was a man who deserved to die, a cross deserving to be destroyed, etc. Feel free to pick any reason you like."

"—Matriarch!"

Perhaps looking for permission to kill Kururi, Oratorie gripped the oar hard and yelled. However, Bivorio simply crossed her liberated arms and hugged her own shoulders:

"Ahhh... Yes, it's completely true. Abyss is already dead... And he was steeped in sin..."

"There are two things I want to know. I've decided to ask one of them right now."

While paying attention to Oratorie's movements, Kururi emotionlessly asked Bivorio:

"Is Abyss still your most beloved? Do you hate me for killing Abyss?"

Bivorio gasped then closed her eyes and buried her face against her chest amidst her long hair. In a trembling, sobbing voice, she murmured in response.

An extremely simple—

But profound—

Answer.

"I don't know."

Instantly, Kururi crashed into Bivorio, but not to attack her. The one attacking was Oratorie who had swung the cursed oar at Bivorio.

Spinning nonstop to evade Oratorie's attack, Kururi picked up Bivorio in her arms directly. Standing before her, Oratorie rested the oar on her shoulder and giggled.

"Fufu... Ufufufu... Ufufufufu! This is the so-called—All mysteries are revealed! Although I don't know what you people are planning, but—Guha! This Matriarch is fake! You can't deceive my eyes. As the leader who founded the Family out of familial love, through familia love, for familial love—the Matriarch—she logically cannot say such words. Like a god that transcends the transcendent—the Patriarch can't possibly be killed by this kind of little lass! Fake, fake! You're—a—fake—! Fakes and imposters should be condemned and killed without mercy as quickly as possible! Ufufufufufu!"

"Tsk... Is she mad? Although she's already mad in the first place."

"Ahhh—Sorry, sorry, I don't know, I really don't understand anything anymore—if you want to kill me, please go ahead and kill me. After all, I'm steeped in sin and she is also one of my sins. If I could be killed in as agonizingly slow and torturous a manner possible, that would be my greatest wish of a lifetime..."

Kururi clicked her tongue impatiently.

"I won't let that happen, because I have one more thing I need to find out."

"It's my fault, it's all the fault of my heavily sinned self. Ahhh~ Who will come and hurt me...!?"

"Seriously—Could you just calm down?"

Carrying Bivorio, Kururi retreated a great distance and even threw Haruaki's side a glance for some reason—Ignoring the battle stance the quartet had entered, she walked over openly.

"By this point, I don't want to fight you at all, so just do whatever you want. But I've decided on my own to use you guys as my shield."

Literally doing as she pleased, Kururi walked to a corner of the training hall behind Haruaki's group and set Bivorio down lightly. Watching the two of them, Konoha asked:

"W-What should we do now, Haruaki-kun? She does show zero killing intent right now... But as a side note, the killing intent over there is astounding."

While they were not noticing, Oratorie had run over to a small tap in another corner of the training hall, turning the water on with her head under it. While splashing the water vigorously, she said:

"Mmm—icy cold, that feels so refreshing. So, I should calm down. Calm down and think carefully—Very well, I've decided! Although I don't know why I need to do this, I shall kill everyone present!"

A super fast decision.

Then while her red hair dripped with water creepily, Oratorie turned her head and declared:

"First. Of. All~ That fake there looks like she can be killed any time... So let me start off with Haruaki Yachi over there. Yes, it's you! I will kill you then find out the true Matriarch's whereabouts!"

...Under incomprehensible logic, Haruaki was determined to be the first prey. Haruaki really wished to convince her to reconsider.

"Don't delude yourself. You're an even worse psycho than rumored... Anyway, it looks like we need to fight that woman first."

"However—there's also a guy here whom we can't allow to escape. The freak who made us suffer in his games just to satisfy his desire for knowledge. What are we going to do, Yachi?"

You're asking me what to do? I'm probably not the one who can decide. Not me, who has neither shed a single drop of blood nor suffered any mental trauma.

Hence, Haruaki borrowed the question—

"What are we going to do, Fear?"

Fear closed her eyes lightly and murmured:

"I don't know what's correct, I don't know anything. Right, I said it this morning, Haruaki. I said that I was ignorant and wanted to find out what I am supposed to do. Or back when that guy proposed the deal to me, I asked: what should I do? What the correct answer should be, what is it?"

"How would I know?"

"But you hit me, right? Umm... Because I did something wrong, you were angry, right?"

She opened her eyes slightly, greatly resembling the way children would sneak a peek at their parents.

"That's right, because you did something wrong, I was angry. But how would I know what the right answer is? If you do wrong things in the future, I'll still get angry even if I don't know the right answer. Although I want to know the right answer as much as you do, I would still get angry."

"Mm-hm~ Why does that feel kind of unreasonable?"

"Because I'm different from that bastard research freak over there. I'm just a great idiot, that can't be helped. Compared to knowing things, there should be more important matters, right... So, it's much simpler. In other words, what I want to ask is—What do you feel should be done?"

After a moment's pause...

Giggles were emitted from Fear's throat and her silver hair began to shake.

"If it's that simple, it's easy... Yes, that's right, perhaps ignorant people can only accept things and act like an ignorant person, because it's impossible to suddenly become omniscient."

Fear opened her eyes. On further examination, she was exuding an intimidating aura of confidence. Despite the filth on her uniform and body, just as she had said earlier, all her bleeding seemed to have stopped already.

"The things I want to do are very simple—seeing as Kururi and that disgusting Bivorio are giving up, I won't bother with them anymore! Since Oratorie declared she'll kill Haruaki, I'll beat her up and foil her plan! And since Pakuaki did so many infuriating things, that guy needs a good

beating as punishment! Haruaki, Kirika and Cow Tits, what do you guys think about this decision!?"

Naturally, none of them objected.

Now that what they had to do was decided, the next problem was how to carry it out.

"Since there's no time—Sorry but I'll decide each person's role. I'll handle Pakuaki, or rather, 'Let me be responsible for Un Izoey.'"

"Kirika, that's too reckless!"

"Th-That's right! That girl is a very powerful master—"

"There's no time for debate now. I'm probably the weakest among us, but precisely because of that, I know I must engage that girl. Since she is only here for protecting Pakuaki, in other words, she is simply a defensive threat without any intent to kill. For us, Oratorie is equally threatening, but an offensive threat. Hence, there is a clear difference in meaning... Also, we can't allow a shortage in combat power. So please, Fear-kun and Konoha-kun, please attack in full force."

Speaking as fast as machine-gun fire, Kirika suddenly began to take off her uniform swiftly.

Everything. She took off all her clothes from head to toe.

"Ooh... wawah! Cl-Class Rep...?"

She took off her socks and her uniform top. Pulling the zipper at her waist, her skirt fell down as a result. Even her shirt beneath the top was removed—Finally, all that remained was the black bondage suit.

"I-Idiot! Stop staring at me! Th-This cannot be helped, the circumstances are forcing my hand, so I have no choice here...! Th-This is also for showing my serious determination, got that!?"

"Somehow I feel like I'm on the line between getting it and not getting it—Anyway, Konoha, hurry and stop reaching out with your hand silently! Now is not the time for testing out your Immorality Breaker!"

"Seriously. Listen carefully now, you all know that I am immortal so I always have a way to take care of things. Faced with an opponent who has

no intention to kill, I should be able to handle things alone. Just leave it to me."

There was no time to stop her. Extending the «Tragic Black River» to take hold of a beam on the ceiling, Kirika used it as a pivot to jump, then wobbling on unsteady footsteps, she went over the approaching Oratorie, finally landing in front of Pakuaki. Naturally, before she got there, Un Izoey had already stood in between them.

"Ahhh~ Seriously... Will she really be okay...!?"

"There's no way to stop her now. Besides, the enemy on this side is here."

Fear held up her Rubik's cube while Konoha readied her knife hand and stepped forward in a combat-ready stance.

"Damn it, I'll have to observe from the sidelines again...! Be careful of the enemy, Fear, Konoha!"

Dripping wet all over, Oratorie approached slowly, stopping when her oar was just a few steps away from Fear and Konoha. Exhaling, she cast a very gentle gaze towards the raised oar.

"Okay, let's get ready to start. On that surprising night when I was struck by that wound of a lifetime, cast into the sea known as the future, the vast view of red as I struggled desperately along the path of a new bride to reward him for his passionate heat—Fufu, you are the one who used the method of tragedy to bring about reasonable misinterpretations of cliched romances, so I will not hesitate at all... As always, we will love each other while immersed in memories of rifts, oceans, redness and heat!"

Words that started out like whispers towards a baby ended up as a forceful speech. Spinning the oar with her entire arm as one would spin a pen, she took a step forward.

"Excuse me, I'm already accustomed to this, so I won't be slipping and falling due to the water. Sorry if I've betrayed your expectations."

"I wouldn't expect that from anyone but Sovereignty. But more importantly—Speaking of getting accustomed, I can't let Haruaki-kun's eyes get accustomed to your indecent appearance. There is nothing I wish more than getting rid of you completely from my sight!"

"I agree. I really wish for those eyesores of yours to disappear faster, meat lump number one and number two. And today, I'm bearing a grudge

towards swimsuits in general, so let me take out some of my anger on you!"

"This isn't really important, but I'm curious. Which side is number one and which side is number two!?"

Fear and Konoha rushed forward simultaneously. The swimsuit woman swung her oar greatly to enter a stance, ready for battle any time. Fear engaged her first in close combat.

"Mechanism No.20 slashing type, great blade form: «A Hatchet of Lingchi»—Curse Calling!"

The sound produced was not creaking but grating. Not clicking but clacking.

The sound of the Rubik's cube turning seemed to be mixed with the noise of heavy steel, carrying killing intent. The emulated cube instantly took on an appropriate form, hence transforming into an axe for chopping humans to death.

The axe struck the oar repeatedly with a symphony of deep noises. Then face to face, the two combatants produced exceptionally violent sounds—After a moment's pause, their silver and red hair swirled up as though from the aftershock.

Both sides' weapons were clashing equally in a fight to the death, then they stopped.

At this moment, Haruaki could see the corners of Fear's mouth turning up into a smile.

"Mechanism No.3 severance type, descending form: «Guillotine»!"

The sudden transformation caused Oratorie to lose balance, but her oar had already swung out front due to her momentum with its tip clamped inside Fear's dramatic execution device.

Without any hesitation, Fear ordered the guillotine's slanted cutting edge to descend—However, she then retreated with an alarmed expression. Unbelievably, the oar, which should have been decapitated, swept past before Fear's chest.

"Tsk... I see, it has the power to pass through!"

"Ufufu, indeed you are correct. So defense is useless. Be careful. Although the Matriarch permits us to eliminate Wathes that stand in our way, destroying them too arbitrarily would anger her—By the way, you are the Fear-in-Cube that the Matriarch loves so much, right?"

Oratorie took this time to look up and down over Fear's body .

"On further inspection, you really are so small and cute... I'd really love to hold you tight and sleep together. Hmm, looks like I must forgive you after breaking off your arms and legs."

"That should be my line instead! If you want to sleep with her, be my guest, but please don't complain if anything happens to your own arms and legs!"

"How could I possibly let her so easily!? And you, what do you mean by calling me small! I'll curse you!"

Konoha pounced and starting fighting with her knife hand. On the other hand, Fear switched to another tool of torture and execution to look for an opening. Then Oratorie Rabdulmunagh prepared to unleash a wave of impacts to engulf the two girls.

Made dripping wet just like its master by the splashing water, the oar's dark stains looked as though it had been sucking blood.

Caught between the two girls, one gray-haired and dark-skinned, the man began to speak.

"I can't help but point out that this is a foolish strategy, Kirika."

"On the other hand, I disagree."

"The situation now is different from during the day. Now that the game is over, I have no reason to hesitate. I could very well use force to take you back directly—if you believe that Un Izoey has no intention to kill, you are sorely mistaken. Against any enemy who assaults me, this child will deliver fatal attacks without any hesitation at all. Moreover, for the sake of accuracy, in actual fact, it's not like you 'can't die' but 'you revive after dying.' So that is why I say your strategy is foolish, Kirika. Once you lose consciousness, it's over. In other words, I could simply give the following order: Un Izoey, kill Kirika and take her back."

This explanation treated Kirika as though she were just a specimen of local fauna. But in actual fact, Pakuaki probably treated her as just an object to be dealt with on the side.

At this moment, the dark-skinned girl moved her eyes and asked:

"My wish to confirm: Confirmation for 'Is that really okay'?"

"Of course you can, no need to hold back. She's currently wearing a Wathe that is, in a certain sense, even rarer than «The World Seen by Alicia Pitrelli». It's a Wathe that will automatically self-repair so long as there's no severe damage, unlike others that would break from damage in one spot."

"—Affirmative."

The handcuffed girl stepped forward with a gliding stride of her dark-skinned foot. However, Kirika reached out to stop Un Izoey with her left hand which did not have the «Tragic Black River» wrapped around it.

"Hmm? What's the matter, Kirika?"

"...I'd like to ask you something. That collar you placed around my neck, was it simply just for punishment? Was it really just for such a simple purpose?"

Pakuaki showed slight surprise in response to that question. Then—

"Well, disregarding the fact that it's very weak, I did have other goals in mind, yes. But if I explain it directly, it's kind of embarrassing... That is, I hope you could remember the past. I am your older brother, so it's not like I want us to be at odds. If there's an opportunity for us to make up, of course I'd want to do that... Like right now, could you be honest with your feelings, Kirika? Or perhaps, you have no recollection?"

There was a few seconds' pause after Pakuaki finished.

Kirika then nodded.

"Very well, now... I'll be honest. I remembered. I remembered those happy times in the past. That sense of isolation made me recall the loneliness I felt when waiting for my father to come home. That sense of isolation made me recall the loneliness of not having a mother. Furthermore, that sense of isolation—"

She bowed her head slightly and her shoulders trembled.

"I recall it... Back when I was lonely, my brother's... back... that I always relied on..."

Pakuaki took a deep breath. Then his eyes became very gentle and he muttered like a father:

"Come home, Kirika. Return to my side."

The trembling in Kirika's shoulders did not stop. She then tried to force words out, but her shoulders continued to tremble.

"...You really think..."

"Hmm?"

No way, she could not hold it back anymore. She could not hold back the excessive joy she was feeling.

"...Did you really think I'd say that, Yamimagari Pakuaki!? How absolutely ridiculous! Although I did remember about my father, I have no brother—On the other hand, you should reflect on what you've done to me!"

It was worthwhile to act out this sort of unfamiliar performance. Although it was so embarrassing that she felt as though her cheeks were about to burst into flames, it was terrific. Simply the sight of that man's astounded expression felt exceptionally refreshing.

Perhaps either he was bluffing or he really was that composed, Pakuaki immediately smiled wryly and said:

"You've changed, Kirika. In the past, even if you played jokes, you'd never trick people with that kind of performance."

"Perhaps I've become stupid after getting to know those people!"

Kirika suddenly extended the «Tragic Black River» towards Pakuaki. Instantly, a dark-skinned afterimage surfaced from below, severing the belt in the middle of its journey. Un Izoey's demeanor was full of belligerence, perfect.

Because Kirika had already decided what to do.

Kirika also had a role model, the silver-haired girl who had made herself all covered with bloody wounds, even though she clearly did not need to do that.

Hence, Kirika decided to act in the same manner.

To proudly make mistakes on her own volition under conditions when the right answer was unknown.

Part 2

The «Human-Perforator» charged fearlessly ahead but was deflected by the wooden oar, whose hardness was probably strengthened as a result of its curse. Oratorie counterattacked. Fear swiftly pulled back the drill against its advancing momentum and prepared to block the approaching wood—But someone kicked her in the bottom.

"Get out of the way!"

"Oof!"

The oar sang a song as it sliced through the air, passing through the space beside Fear's stumbling body.

"Don't suddenly kick me, Cow Tits! I'll curse you!"

"Oh enough of that. Seriously, how many times has it been? Didn't I tell you it can't be blocked!?"

"I-I know, okay..."

The wooden oar was capable of passing through objects. Naturally, this included Fear's tools of torture and execution that she used for defense. Despite knowing that fact, Fear's body could not keep up that easily. And stop speaking with such swagger, okay!?

"Damn it, you domesticated tits! That's totally cheating, you're clearly ignoring the issue yourself!"

"By this point, I don't care if you're making up stupid nicknames for me. But that's not my problem because it implies the oar cannot pass through the human body."

"Ufufu, you are completely correct. But I'm not afraid of those karate chops of yours at all. While saying 'Heed my advice and just give up obediently, so that I can kill that little boy over in the back, okay?' that would be a so-called sneak attack!"

Oratorie swung the oar to attack. While Fear dodged—

"Mechanism No.5 impaling type, upright form: «A Skewer Loved by Vlad Tepes»!"

She also tossed out the execution stake that was connected to the chain of cubes. However, Oratorie had already moved. Penetrating the floor with the oar's tip, she used the oar as support for a front flip. Using a motion akin to a human water wheel, she delivered a devastating attack towards Konoha—

"Guh...!"

In actual fact, Oratorie was quite a proficient master but her strengths were completely different from Un Izoey's. If Un Izoey's strength lay in speed, hers was power. Power to deliver death to an ordinary human through a single strike, combined with random blows and more random blows that rendered defense meaningless no matter what equipment was used. Like a turbulent storm what would devour and crush all ships, she unleashed random blows repeatedly.

While transforming the stake into a new form, Fear threw a glance backwards. Haruaki was watching with his fists clenched. I can't lose, I absolutely must not lose—Even if storms could crush massive ships of any size, a storm capable of crushing a steel cube definitely did not exist.

Then Fear entered the fray again amidst the random pummeling.

Part 3

Kirika reflexively used her left arm to block the incoming knife that was aiming for her carotid artery. This slashed through the outside of her wrist, adding more pain to her body. Half of her flesh and the middle of her bones were severed. If one were to twist hard, her hand would probably come off like a popsicle. But even without any twisting, simply by grabbing the wound in attempt to staunch the bleeding—There was a feeling of flesh squirming. This body was too disgusting, really too disgusting. But under such disgusting conditions, it continued to endure.

"Huff... Huff..."

"My conclusion: overreaching movements, overestimating self, not going to work."

"Is that... so...? Have you ever hunted a wild beast whose wounds keep healing?"

"Never seen that type of beast before. But the beast here now, not all wounds are healing instantly. When elephants and rhinos bleed, movements become slower."

Although Kirika could not understand what exactly Un Izoey's analogy was comparing her to, it was true that her wounds were not completely healed. After all, the time taken for recovery depended on the severity of the injuries.

Currently, her left hand had finally recovered enough for her fingers to move. Her thigh whose bone was exposed just now was still pulsing with pain. As for the hole under her breast, the usual liquid was spewing out generously as though to skip the process of vomiting blood. Nevertheless, a rusty stench was rising up her throat and Kirika desperately tried to swallow and suppress that reverse flow.

Seeing the gray hair quiver slightly, the «Tragic Black River» instantly reacted and extended over. Despite being severed along the way, it continued to extend, unfazed. Like an obsessive snake, it acted as though imbued with a serial killer's obsession.

The belt was both a rope for binding and a whip at the same time. And whips were powerful weapons beyond an average person's imagination. Not only was a whip capable of scraping skin off, but it could also strip flesh down to the bone, then used to kill the person. That was the kind of weapon it was.

While severing the belt as she slowly approached, Un Izoey suddenly distanced herself at this time. Lowering herself and extending her left leg as though performing a Cossack dance, this action caused Kirika to frown. A fatal instant. Using this opening to take out darts from her skirt, Un Izoey lodged a dart on her left toe's bowstring. While leaning her upper body backwards in an almost horizontal posture, she used her cuffed hands to shoot. Multiple times in succession.

Supporting her body, her right leg acted as a gun's grip while her left leg served as the barrel and her upper body was the hammer and trigger. Kirika was unable to dodge the darts that were flying at her almost as fast as bullets but she managed to guard her head with both arms.

"Gah...!"

She could feel foreign objects drilling into her body. Solid objects cutting her open repeatedly, mercilessly invading her body. Scorching, scorching,

she could not help but feel an illusion as though her body was about to explode. The ruptures and holes in her body, created forcefully by the foreign objects, completely ignoring her own will, seemed to contract and squirm with delight as they accepted those scorching foreign objects.

Kirika was pierced in four places: shoulder, breast, lower abdomen and thigh respectively. Unruly liquid gushed out from these four places impatiently. This amount of blood loss was really quite problematic—Kirika could feel her mind getting dizzy.

"This is also... used in hunting...?"

"Yes, confirmed by such a confirmation. Mainly used to hunt birds flying in the sky."

"That makes sense, birds, I see now. I like birds too. Especially tasty when roasted with salt."

Forcing a smile, Kirika withdrew the «Tragic Black River»'s tip back to her hand.

Un Izoey approached. Presumably, once she immobilized her prey using flying projectiles, she would take her time and slash the prey's throat. Finally, she had entered her hunting mode.

However, Kirika was neither a winged bird nor a fanged beast.

She was just a foolish human.

Precisely because of that, she was capable of certain things—

Then with trembling legs, Kirika rushed towards Un Izoey on her own initiative.

Anxiety. Despite the advantages offered by Konoha's knife hand which could not be penetrated by the oar, that was all there was to it. Their difference in range was too disparate.

Still, Konoha was not completely unable to attack. She had to stop this woman from killing Haruaki. Stopping her was already a decided resolution.

"Take this!"

Konoha jumped and executed a forceful, flying kick, however—

"This would be a so-called perfect hit in baseball!"

"—Kyah!?"

Oratorie swung the oar forcefully to strike at Konoha. However, Konoha used the tip of her kicking foot to step on the oar and was sent flying high into the air. Her twin braids sweeping across the ceiling as she performed a flip in the air, Konoha managed to land on all fours. By the time she looked up, Oratorie had already switched to engaging Fear in battle.

"Konoha! Are you okay?"

Haruaki rushed over. Konoha pushed herself up and replied:

"I'm okay but this place is dangerous. You should retreat to the back—"

"I'm sorry but could you please transform into the sword. I think that would be better."

Haruaki's expression was very serious. Perhaps he had already come up with some plan?

"But there are many problems with that. First of all, Haruaki-kun, you'll be at risk. Chopping with my hands, I can perform defensive maneuvers. But once I turn into a sword, I cannot guard anymore... Being unable to block would be a rather severe disadvantage."

"I know that. But this cannot continue either, there's no time."

Konoha followed his gaze and saw Kirika fighting Un Izoey. Naturally, she could not remain unscathed and a certain vivid color was constantly increasing.

"So, let's use the Sword-Kill Counter. Only that move can defeat her in one go."

"Eh—But that oar is able to pass through my attacks, right? The Sword-Kill Counter is a technique that targets weapons..."

"Yes, that's right. It probably won't work if I use it the usual way. No, it won't work at all."

Then saying "That's why"—Haruaki proceeded to share his plan.

It was a very simple strategy. But at the same time, Konoha found it exceptionally difficult.

She sighed.

"It's not going to work unless I can coordinate perfectly with that child... But the problem is, if we were able to do that in the first place, things wouldn't be this difficult now. Last time during the fight against Kururi-san, it did cross my mind. Whenever I fight alongside her, it's as though our rhythms don't match, or perhaps..."

"No, we must give it a try—"

While listening to Haruaki, Konoha lightly held his hand. Then comfortably storing that feeling of his hand and its warmth into the box of cherished memories in the inner depths of her mind, Konoha returned to her original form.

"Hey, you made so many objections but yet you went along so readily... Is it really okay?"

"No problem. After all, there is absolutely no doubt that tacit coordination does not exist between me and that child. But even though that's the truth, I don't know why—"

"H-Hey, you two—! Chatting away so happily while I'm fighting by myself, I'll curse you!"

Hearing Fear's complaint, Konoha lightly shook the tip of her blade. Then she continued:

"I don't know why—But so long as we have you between us, Haruaki-kun, I believe there will be tacit coordination."

"Haruaki, don't rush ahead too much. Anyway, don't force yourself to block even if you're attacked, you must find a way to dodge!"

Konoha really felt like calling Fear out for openly pirating her warnings to repeat to Haruaki but she did not speak. She was currently concentrating. Hence, even with Konoha's assistance in moving his body, Haruaki must still maintain awareness of dodging on his own. Hence, he listened to Fear and looked for opportunities to strike without charging too far ahead.

"You finally stepped up! Why don't you step aside, cute little Wathe. My target is that boy!"

Neither Fear nor Haruaki heeded her words.

Haruaki was only waiting for Konoha's concentration to become keen.
Ready yet? Still not ready yet?

(Don't be too impatient, Konoha. But please, could you hurry up a bit...!?)

Haruaki currently worried the most about Kirika, naturally. He had sneaked glances at her situation several times, but she did not look like she had the upper hand in any way. Hence, it was imperative to settle things here so that he could head over and support her.

Just at this moment—

"Guh... Ah... Ha... A-Ahhhhhh... Ahhh!"

Kirika's extremely loud screams were heard.

Haruaki reflexively looked over there.

Then entering his view was—

Kirika with a knife deeply embedded in her heart with blood gushing out violently like a ruptured pipe

Part 4

The distance instantly shrank to zero. Kirika guarded her neck and head using her arms. She must prevent instantaneous causes of death such as severing the neck or penetrating the brain. In that case, where would the enemy target instead?

—Thump.

Kirika mistook it for the force of her heartbeat, originating deep within her body. A force that seemed to turn her entire body into a beating heart.

She was pierced. Kirika saw Un Izoey approaching with gliding steps, her cuffed hands touching the ground and raising her right foot, but Kirika did not see the knife held between her toes. This was only natural, because it was already buried inside her.

Within Kirika's field of view that was beginning to shake violently, Un Izoey's emotionless eyes were looking up at her.

(My body... Hurry and move!)

Kirika's body finally moved because it had been waiting for this precise situation to move. Conversely, if this awaited opportunity had not arrived, she would have remained still—Precisely because it was this kind of action, Un Izoey reacted an instant too late.

There was only one chance. Mobilizing the arms which she had used to protect her neck, Kirika grabbed Un Izoey's right foot hard. The impact caused her heart to scream in pain, but there were more urgent things to attend to.

"Gaha... You stabbed me, right? You stabbed deeply into my body, right? That's good enough..."

Kirika listened to her own voice, delivered with blood, while controlling the «Tragic Black River». Watching Un Izoey's gaze waver with surprise and unease, Kirika could feel the knife in her heart invading deeper. Instead of pulling her right foot back, Un Izoey seemed to have decided it would be quicker to just kill Kirika by pushing the knife further.

Her decision was correct, very clearly correct. Even if Kirika were to use the «Tragic Black River» to entangle Un Izoey at this moment, during the time required to strangle and break her neck, Kirika's heart would suffer even more severe damage, thereby resulting in death.

Hence, Kirika needed a method for seizing victory instantaneously. She needed a method of reversal in the next instant.

Hence—

Instead of entangling Un Izoey's neck with the «Tragic Black River», she aimed for the handcuffs instead.

Then Kirika pulled, pulling in Un Izoey's hands.

Once she was pulled in, the leather belt's work was done. Kirika released the foot she was gripping then forcefully used her bloodstained hands to grab Un Izoey's wrists—

And made her touch the hilt of the knife that was buried in her heart.

Un Izoey's eyes widened to a sad degree.

"...Even if... in a few more seconds... I'll be dead..."

Un Izoey's body began to tremble. Staring at her own hands in disbelief, she kept trembling.

Kirika's hands applied more force.

Desperately twisting the knife as though she were pulling it into her body, Kirika made it stab deeper, deeper, ever deeper—

Letting the blade that Un Izoey was holding violate her body unchecked.

"...But the cause of my death is your pair of hands. According to the rules of your tribe, you are forbidden from staining your hands with the enemy's blood. But now, you've touched it—Un Izoey!"

"Ah... Ah..."

At this moment, originally icy cold, the girl's eyes now only contained—

Nothing but pure unadulterated—

Terror.

Hence, Kirika smiled lightly like a corpse and said:

"A first experience, congratulations."

"—Ooh, ahhh, ahhhhhhhh!"

The gray-haired girl desperately struggled, trying to withdraw her hands. Although she easily struggled free, it did not matter anymore, because her foot had let go of the knife, she was sitting collapsed on the floor, her body trembling nonstop. All she could do was stare at her bloodstained hands.

Kirika originally hypothesized that this should be able to create an opening but the results surpassed her expectations. This was probably an imposed belief that had been branded upon Un Izoey's deepest psyche since early childhood. A pathological taboo that went as far as to demand suicide as though it were perfectly logical.



As the belt wrapped around her neck unhindered, Kirika granted her peace through the loss of consciousness.

Next, the «Tragic Black River» locked onto its next prey, choking the neck of Pakuaki who was crying out in surprise.

"Huff... Guh... Ah... Huff... Fufu... Fufufu. If it weren't for knowing from the start that my clothes would get dirty, I wouldn't have undressed, because it's too embarrassing..."

"I get it now, so you planned on doing this all along? What a reckless strategy—cough cough, but you didn't break my neck in one go, why is that?"

"Because... there's no value."

"You're already on the verge of death. I'm sorry, but I'll escape once you die."

"...U-Unfortunately for you, my body just barely managed to catch up and will recover from this point onwards. Haha, I didn't expect her to be that gentle—Besides, I already accounted for the possibility of dying here. I was thinking, as long as Un Izoey was dealt with... Then those guys would help me handle the rest."

Pakuaki turned his gaze lightly.

"You mean them...? The way I see it, they're in a desperate fight. Is it really okay for you to withhold assistance?"

"...Don't worry, they can handle it."

Kirika followed his gaze. Despite the dimming of her vision probably due to excessive blood loss, she was still able to see what was happening over there.

The silver-haired girl was swinging her torture tool. This girl had chosen by her freewill to shed her own blood for Kirika's sake. Hence, Kirika had decided to repay that erroneous yet noble-minded choice. What she came up with was this method of intentionally burying Un Izoey's blade deep within her own body.

The other person over there was the boy wielding the Japanese sword. He had been gazing in Kirika's direction with surprise, but immediately, his eyes showed understanding. Apparently, he had witnessed the instant

when Kirika had suffered that wound. He must have been very shocked back then.

Kirika communicated by nodding towards them without saying a word because she no longer had the strength to yell loudly. However, this action was already more than sufficient.

The boy nodded vigorously in response. The Japanese sword's shaking motion probably expressed the same meaning as well.

Then they started taking action, aiming for victory just like her.

Suddenly, Kirika thought of something.

With a slight sense of loneliness and unease, she wondered.

Would he get angry with her as well—?

Kirika had won. In that case, it was Haruaki's turn.

Fear's loud shouting entered his ears.

"How ludicrous, Oratorie Rabdulmunagh!"

"What... are you saying... ludicrous?"

Haruaki advanced slowly while the Japanese sword in his hand urged him to quicken his pace.

"You and your faction, it's all over already! Abyss is dead and Bivorio is repenting for her sins!"

"That's a so-called big fat lie! Yeah right it's over!"

The silver hair and red hair crossed over, passing by each other, then approached again as though drawn by mutual attraction. Haruaki was also rushing to Fear's side as if attracted by gravity. Fear remained on high alert and entered a stance with «A Hatchet of Lingchi».

"Will it work?"

"Certainly."

Konoha answered briefly. Fear nodded lightly in comprehension.

"However, when should we coordinate the attack?"

"How about the next one? More than likely, the enemy will unleash her strongest attack next."

As soon as Haruaki spoke, Fear glanced sideways at him skeptically.

"How would you know?"

"Just look behind you."

"...I see. I get it now."

Then Fear took a deep breath.

"Listen carefully to me, Oratorie! That whatever belief about us being transcoders, or that joke about the existence of that imposed familial love, it's all meaningless now. Those arguments not only failed to move us, but they also failed to change anything. You are just scum, an ignoramus in search of knowledge who took advantage of today's chaos to sneak in, a common madwoman who could not be any more ordinary!"

"No! My goal is—"

"To find Bivorio? She's right there!"

"No no! That's a fake!"

"Really? Then in that case, what is she holding in her hands?"

Oratorie stopped moving, apparently stupefied.

Bivorio was standing in front of her gaze, in the corner of the training hall where Kururi had sought refuge.

She was staring straight ahead with a twisted expression.

Held together, her hands were raised up in front of her face.

She simply stood there, holding a white object in her hands.

In fact, anyone could tell with through further examination that those were the remains of a cross.

"Oratorie... Please listen to me. Abyss is already dead. Indeed, he has already died..."

Haruaki did not understand why she had that in her possession. Perhaps she had taken it from the school, or Pakuaki had playfully stuffed it into her pocket, either of those would not be surprising. These were the only two possibilities Haruaki could come up with at this moment.

Oratorie gripped the oar hard, almost enough to create sounds of wood cracking.

"Ahhh... Fake... Damn fake... Do you really think you could deceive me by preparing a little prop like that!?"

"N-No, this is real. Right before my eyes, Abyss really was..."

"Shut up—!"

She's coming. With a face like a demon's, Oratorie came.

Just as predicted, it was an attack, unprecedently simpler than before yet more powerful than ever.

This was the very moment they had been desperately waiting for.

Haruaki exchanged glances with Fear and they sprang into action. Very likely, Fear and Konoha's minds were connected at this moment.

Hence, all that was left was to move.

Haruaki and Konoha shifted slightly left while Fear moved right as though to exchange positions. Then they waited for the instant when Oratorie's oar was swung down.

"Fear, Konoha!"

This was the technique that Muramasa Konoha had discovered in her quest to abstain from killing. Raising observation, judgment and instinct to their highest limits to approach prescience for but an instant. Thereafter, the sword knew. The sword knew the location of the opposing weapon's heart and how to pierce that heart with one stroke of the sword—!

The sword trembled slightly in Haruaki's hand and exuded an aura of sharpness and clarity that seemed to release her accumulated sighs all at once. In one natural movement, his left hand gripped the scabbard gently.

Then—

Faced against the expected attack of Oratorie's wooden oar, the true blade pulsed and slid out of the black scabbard—

"Sword-Kill—Counter!"

"Tsk! «Tragedy Method»!"

Perhaps warned by her sixth sense regarding the mission borne by Konoha's blade, Oratorie reflexively invoked her oar's power of penetration.

"Take this——!"

However, Fear also unleashed her axe's attack at the exact moment of Konoha's strike.

Had the attacks simply been performed simultaneously, failure would have resulted if the oar blocked them. Whether a barehanded chop partnered with a torture tool, or the combination of a simple black scabbard with a torture tool, the result would have been the same. More explicitly, this approach used Konoha's secret technique as bait—Followed by a simultaneous attack that could only work with the Sword-Kill Counter as bait.

Like Konoha's blade, Fear's axe flew past Oratorie's oar. The blade struck Oratorie mercilessly in the chest. Fear could not help but feel goosebumps on her back, accompanied by a strange cracking sound. It was the sound of certain hard objects breaking one after another, and not just one or two.

"Gah... Haa...!"

The impact caused the cursed oar to fall from Oratorie's hand. It became as vulnerable as a bundle of straw used for testing out a blade. Before the oar could reach the floor—

"Counter—Second Strike!"

The scabbard sung again. As the noise that greatly matched the surrounding training hall atmosphere subsided, the oar was no more, leaving behind nothing but two tragically severed fragments of timber.

Oratorie spat out stomach acid, unconscious with her eyes rolled up. Meanwhile, Bivorio murmured:

"Ahhh... I don't understand. Steeped heavily in sin, what should I do—"

Kneeling on the floor, she was holding that cross fragment in her hands. Kururi bowed her head and stared at the fragment.

"Success... finally. Phew—This took a ton of effort on my part..."

"Nice combination. You two can do it as long as you put your minds to it, see? You two work very well together."

Fear was originally so tired that she was supporting her chin on her axe hilt. Despite Haruaki's sincere praise, she suddenly straightened her body.

"W-What are you talking about!? D-Don't say something so embarrassing, okay? Who wants to work well with this Cow Tits here... Good grief, that's so disgusting! This is coincidence, only coincidence!"

"Do you really need to describe it as disgusting!? To think I almost praised you as well, but now I'm really glad I never said it out loud!"

"I won't feel happy at all to be praised by you! Now that would be truly disgusting!"

"What did you say again!?"

"Fear, don't swing that axe around! And you, Konoha, could you stop leaning your body against me!?"

Haruaki desperately resisted Konoha's movements as he turned his gaze over to Kirika who was the first to conclude her battle.

Although she was all covered in wounds, she smiled wryly as usual—

And made a slight thumbs up gesture.

Naturally, Haruaki responded with the same gesture.

Part 5

"So... What are we going to do, Class Rep?"

"You mean how should this man be dealt with, right?"

In response to Kirika's "What would you do?", Haruaki scratched his head and answered:

"Uh—Well, since he won't be bothering Fear anymore—"

"Obviously, this also means that he will give up on taking Ueno-san back."

Konoha spoke up, still in sword form. Fear nodded in agreement.

"—Hey, are you even listening?"

"Of course. From the way it looks, you don't plan on doing anything cruel to me, right? Oh my~ Thank goodness. Although it's quite strange for me to say this myself, I am quite a super VIP after all. If another organization caught me like this, it would not be strange if they decapitated me on the spot without another word."

Fear glared viciously at Pakuaki who was still being bound by the belt and continued:

"I will make another deal with you. That video you took should be enough to satisfy you, right? So don't you appear before me again because I don't want to take part in your research. If you dare refuse me, I'll instantly trample that video to oblivion."

"Oh... I see."

"Listen carefully to me! What I mean is this: Take that video back with you, but don't you dare approach me again! This is the greatest compromise I'm willing to make!"

"Hey Fear, is that really okay?"

Haruaki asked. Very reluctantly, Fear nodded.

"Of course I'm really mad about having that recorded. But to me, it's just a meaningless video. But to this guy, it counts as important research materials. Since that was also his goal for today, it should be fine to use it to make a deal. So, I compromised."

"Yes, very well. It's agreed."

So simple!

Haruaki's reaction was shared by everyone present. Skeptically, Fear looked up at Pakuaki's face and said:

"...Are you scheming in some way?"

"Not at all. I just think that it would be quite a shame to waste the obtained results. If you ask me not to approach you again, that's fine. After all, I need to spend time to analyze today's data for the time being."

"Not just for the time being, I'm asking you to stay the heck away forever!"

Pakuaki exhaled deeply. Closing his eyes and pondering for a moment, he opened one eye and said:

"...Understood. If a time comes when it cannot be avoided, I'll book an appointment with you beforehand."

"What's wrong with you, why aren't you listening? I already told you to stay away forever—!"

"I'm just talking hypothetically, after all, all sorts of situations could arise. For example—You might propose on your own to 'find out more about yourself.' You probably don't know everything about yourself, right?"

Fear went "Hmm" and frowned.

"...What do you know about me?"

"I'm saying this precisely because I don't know. Anyway, I'll need to sum things up to reach a conclusion first. I'll take the data from today and for now, you can—Oh wait, no."

He smiled then said:

"Without a prior appointment, I won't approach you again. Anyway, that's it."

"Hmm~ So that's how it ends... Really...? Oh right, there's still Kirika's matter! Kirika already said she quit the Lab Chief's Nation, but you said you're taking her back..."

"That's a separate matter from today's purpose. After all, I have given her important Wathes so that can't be ignored."

"You still...!"

Just as Haruaki prepared to rush forward, an arm suddenly reached out in front of him and stopped him. Fresh blood still remained on the arm but was slowly flowing back into the wounds—Kirika's arm.

"Yachi, Fear-kun and Konoha-kun, let me negotiate this matter with him. May I have a brief and private word with him, please?"

Once everyone else had backed off into the distance, Kirika confronted Pakuaki who was still bound by the belt.

"Okay, what do you want to talk to me about?"

"Let me confirm this first: did you really intend to take me back no matter what? Actually, that's probably just an excuse—A deliberate disguise for hiding your goal of observing Fear's powers up close. If you really wanted to take me back, there's no need to arrange such a strange treasure hunt. All you needed to do was blow up the school or something and simply threaten me. At least, that's what the Bivorio Family would have done."

"It really breaks my heart that you'd lump me with those people. I'm a good person. I can't possibly do that kind of thing."

What audacious words. Kirika tightened the «Tragic Black River»'s restraints slightly as she spoke:

"No, you're a villain. Just like how the Family's actions are motivated by their love and desire for Wathes, your actions are always motivated by your desire for knowledge. Don't get others involved just to satisfy your desires!"

"Indeed, there's that. My actions are indeed motivated by the desire to know, but you can't equate that with 'not caring about anything else.' You are my second goal too."

"Or rather, it's because of the two Wathes in my possession—the «Tragic Black River» and «Gimestorante's Love»—Right? Logically speaking, it's because you haven't researched them enough, right? How absolutely ridiculous! In the end, doesn't it ultimately boil down to desire for knowledge again!?"

Pakuaki did not answer. He simply smiled and stared straight into her face.

Kirika inhaled and exhaled. She repeated this action many times.

She did not want to resort to this method. If possible, she did not want to use it.

However, it could not be helped. There were no other solutions in sight, so she had to do this.

"...Kirika, don't give up. I won't give up either and I'll keep trying to take you back—"

"Yeah, I know. And once again it confirms... The fact that your actions are motivated by the desire to know. You really are a worst specimen of a man. However—However, precisely because of that, there is a solution."

Still looking down, Kirika murmured in a voice that was barely audible to Pakuaki.

"A solution, what could that be? I can't imagine one."

"...Let me tell you now. What 'you want to know'—I can give a new research theme. It's something that can only take place while I remain in this school. Although it's very simple, you'll definitely be very interested. Since even I myself am interested in it, I'm sure you'll find it even more interesting."

"Oh~ Although I don't really believe something like that could exist, but I'll listen as a matter of principle... What is it?"

Kirika looked up and clenched her fist involuntarily.

What sort of gaze was she showing right now? A gaze that attempted to shoot this man to death? A gaze of suppressed emotions? Or perhaps... A gaze of fear and unease?

No matter which one, it did not matter. She only needed to do one thing.

Namely, maintain eye contact.

Surely—that conveyed two meanings.

"I've fallen in love."

"...Aha... Hahaha... Hahahahahaha! Huha! Ahhh... Hahaha!"

Pakuaki suddenly burst out laughing and looked at Kirika up close. At the same time, Fear and the others, who were having a simple conversation with the people from the Family, also stared wide-eyed over here. Drats. Kirika frantically waved her hand to indicate "It's okay."

"Huff~... R-Really? Is that so!? I see! Kirika, that really is... truly exceptional—Huff... Ahahaha!"

"N-Not allowed to laugh! Also, keep your voice down!"

"Geh! Okay~ Got it, got it. I'd be in great trouble if my already deficient oxygen supply were to be cut off completely. However, guha! You're right, that really would be a most intriguing research theme. How would your love develop? Wearing the leather bondage suit which would kill her if removed, carrying the killer's belt that compels one to commit strangling murders—How would such a girl's love progress? How do you yourself think it'll turn out?"

"...How on earth would I know how it would turn out?"

Kirika answered honestly. Indeed, how could she possibly know?

"Haha, an excellent answer. Oh my~ Seriously, looks like this is an unknown that is so interesting that it cannot be predicted at all! To me, in terms of desire to know, this would be equivalent in level to a research theme of 'What can a tool of torture and execution, which has been cursed for a very very very long time already, do in the world of humans?'"

Indeed, to this man, the end result did not matter. Whether her love ended in oblivion as logic would dictate—or perhaps through some accidental miracle—it might actually bloom and bear fruit. Or any other result would be fine as well. All he wished to see was the process of that unknown turning into something known.

Hence, Kirika decided to make use of Pakuaki's desire. If it would allow herself to remain in this school, she had no choice but to make a sacrifice.

"...So, that is something you can only observe if I remain here. If you take me back, then that unknown will disappear, remaining unknown forever."

"How troubling, that's a threat directed towards me."

"Of course, I am threatening you."

She stared at Pakuaki with eyes of firm resolve. In response, Pakuaki shrugged helplessly.

"As expected of my little sister, you know me like the back of your hand—Very well, I will submit to your threat. For now, I won't force you to go back."

Kirika breathed a sigh of relief but she deliberately prevented that emotion from appearing on her face. However—

"But..."

"...But what?"

Pakuaki's speech caused her to return to a confrontational stance.

Seeing Kirika's reaction, Pakuaki giggled and smiled intriguingly:

"As much as I don't believe you were lying casually, but as a matter of principle, I still think it's necessary for you to show me—that thing called evidence."

Stroking his newly liberated neck, Pakuaki surveyed his surroundings. The training hall was filled with objects that were originally stored in «The World Seen by Alicia Pitrelli». He first picked up a CalorieMate box and while chewing on a biscuit, he casually picked up a few documents intuitively. Casually stuffing them into his pockets, he then loaded the unconscious Un Izoey onto his shoulder with a "Heave-ho!"

"The other documents shouldn't be that important. Speaking of a souvenir for Sekaibashi Gabriel... Consider this as liquidated damages. After all, there isn't that much important information. Ahhh~ Right, speaking of liquidated damages, just for the sake of amicable relations in the future, I'll leave behind a token gift first. Say, Fear-in-Cube, the remains of «The World Seen by Alicia Pitrelli» are over there by your feet, right? You're free to take it home and study it."

Fear knelt down and carefully picked up the kaleidoscope's remains. Then she frowned.

"Hmm... This is... an Indulgence Disk...! R-Right! Since you said you knew things that I don't know, I'd like to ask about this! Tell me, what on earth is this—"

Just as she looked up again, she saw Pakuaki retrieving a mask from the floor. An iron mask with spikes all over, looking as though it was supposed to be used in some kind of ritual.

"This thing is very ugly and I don't like it, but it can't be helped... Well then, we're going to take our leave for today."

As soon as Pakuaki wore the mask as he muttered, he disappeared along with the girl on his shoulder. This reminded Fear of the scene when Un Izoey was telling her about a secret trick. So that was a tool for making someone disappear.

"He disappeared... Hmph, damn it. Whatever, let's take care of the current situation. Say, Kirika."

"Are you okay? Were you able to talk things out...?"

"Cl-Class Rep."

For the first time after she had taken off Pakuaki's collar, Kirika took a good look at Fear and the group.

Her shoulders shaking slightly, she made an exhausted smile and said:

"—It's fine now, he seems to have abandoned taking me back by forceful means."

Haruaki finally relaxed, the Japanese sword was relieved and Fear felt her heart at ease. Spontaneously, she pounced on Kirika.

"Th-Thank goodness—! Although I'm not sure how it happened, this result is the best! That's really wonderful, Kirika! That means you can continue staying in this school!"

"Yes, that's right... Fufu, don't hold me so tight, some of my wounds still hurt."

"S-Sorry, anyway, it's wonderful!"

"Because I still haven't defeated Yachi's cooking skills, I won't allow him to flee while he's ahead."

"What? It's not like I want to flee while I'm ahead... Anyway, it's just as Fear said. This is wonderful."

"That's right. How relieving... As for the Family, judging from the way things are, they probably won't be back."

Konoha's words prompted Fear to look back. Two figures—plus Oratorie, that made three of them—had already disappeared. The only thing remaining was a certain white piece of debris that was abandoned on the floor as casually as a pebble.

"Hmm, the problem of those people is already solved. Oh my, so the whole incident finally comes to an end..."

"End... End... Crap, I just remembered!"

"W-What is it, Fear-san?"

"Isn't it almost time for the cultural festival to end? We have to get back to the shop to help with closing!"

"That's right. If we're still able to move, the least we could do is help with the final clean up. I think we've caused quite a lot of trouble for our classmates... But before we return, we should clean up our appearances somewhat."

Haruaki frantically cast his gaze aside, probably because he was reminded of the fact that Kirika was dressed in nothing but a bondage suit.

"T-That's true too. We need to help clean up. But even if we're going back, I hope you'll rest for a while first, Class Rep. Fear's uniform is also all tattered. By the way, we can't leave Fear's wounds untreated, continuing to bleed. Also, we need to ask Zenon-san to clean up the training hall—Come to think of it, not everything has ended. There's still a ton of work to do."

Haruaki rapidly finished his speech as though he were trying to hide the fact that Kirika's voluptuous figure was in his view all this time.

Glancing at the side of his face, Kirika sighed with a slightly gloomy expression and said:

"...Yes, there are still many important tasks to do."

Part 6

While Haruaki and his group were still confronting Pakuaki whose mobility they had restricted—

There were two people in a corner of the training hall, looking at the fallen Oratorie. Looking at the woman who had lost her cursed tool, who had lost the Family head she looked up to for support, who had lost everything.

Bivorio caressed her own chest but the feeling remained entrenched. Namely, this was the feeling that she had forgotten until several weeks ago, which now felt as though it comprised over half of her existence—Guilt.

"Now that the surroundings are quiet, let me ask you the final question."

This voice came from Kururi standing beside her. Like Bivorio, she was also staring at the collapsed Oratorie with complicated emotions in her eyes. Without shifting her gaze, she took a breath—

"In your view, the current me... the current us—What are we?"

Guilt made Bivorio tremble and recall all sorts of past memories.

"...People who were invited to form an organization. People who advocated that Wathes were transenders and that sacrificing everything for them was love. People who erroneously spread that doctrine. People who murdered and ordered others to die without any remorse in order to spread that erroneous doctrine."

"No, I said I'm talking about now, didn't I?"

Then like the answer to Kururi's first question earlier, Bivorio did not know.

"If you don't know, then think carefully. In the past, we were wrong. You were crying because you knew we were wrong, isn't that right? I saw it during the sports festival."

"I... don't quite remember. However... You're... right, perhaps... I really did cry."

"The cause should not be limited to Abyss' destruction alone. Even if that was one of the reasons, it shouldn't be the only one. But that's just my opinion—Am I right?"

"...I think.. that should be right. Actually, I've known from a long time ago, I knew that our past selves were clearly in the wrong. Using wrong reasons to gather problematic people, then taking wrong actions."

"But we had no choice but to do that."

This was stated calmly and sonorously. Bivorio looked towards the side of Kururi's face but Kururi remained facing forward, as though it were her duty to gaze upon Oratorie who had lost everything.

"Even if the reasons were wrong, we had no choice but to do that. After all, I accepted the Family's invitation myself but I had no other choice but to accept. Everyone was the same. Precisely because we belonged nowhere, wrong people could only band together to create a home for ourselves."

"That's... right, it was—the past... Family, steeped heavily in sin."

Bivorio thought to herself that she was equally responsible. Collapsed in the distance, Oratorie Rabdulmunagh's plight stood as evidence of the Family's guilt. Hence, Bivorio turned her gaze towards Oratorie again.

"The only ones who have realized this heavy sin are you and me. It once crossed my mind, what should I do? I also wondered, having lost our home, where could we find a new place to belong to?"

Kururi's family had committed suicide together, leaving her as the sole survivor. Furthermore, she had suffered long term abuse from her uncle and ended up killing him. Then imprisoned by the law, once that ended, she had found the wrong home in the Family.

Now, that home had finally come to an end.

Where should she go henceforth?

But as one who helped create the wrongs of that home, did she have a right to ask "where should she go henceforth?"

"Let me ask the same question again. Although it's very incompetent, let me very shamefully ask again. Having discovered the wrongs you have committed like me, you, a person who was like a mother to me in the past, what are your thoughts on a girl who was like your child in the past?"

Bivorio thought "Oh I see now" and understood.

Because Kururi wanted to know. Two people who had both lost their homes and both realized the wrongs they had committed—Weren't they both searching for a home to belong to?

"Perhaps... Like... family... I suppose. If that 'child' has no objections to this notion."

After all, Bivorio still cherished them. Whenever she looked at Kururi or Oratorie, she was thankful that they were still alive—She felt that from the bottom of her heart. But undeniably, there was also a selfish sense of comfort rising, feeling thankful that there will not be any new guilt. But at the same time—She could not deny feeling happy simply for the survival of these two who had once spent time with her in the past.

At this moment, Kururi finally turned her gaze towards Bivorio. But as soon as they made eye contact, she felt embarrassed and scratched her face. Then turning her face away, she said:

"Really? In that case, it can't be helped, since I've already decided what I'm going to do next. Because I already have nothing."

"Is it really okay? Despite knowing how heavy my sins are, who knows how I can atone for past wrongs?"

"Well.. In terms of 'who knows,' I'm no better than you. After all, I don't even know how I'm going to make a living, isn't that quite pathetic? Without anyone to teach me how to make a living, I'll surely die out on the streets... As for atonement, I'm fine with anything, except atoning by dying out on the streets, I can't accept that."

These words were delivered in her characteristically indifferent tone of voice. It counted as a sort of indirect encouragement.

Wanting severe punishment, wanting fatal punishment, those thoughts still remained. But at the very least, they must live on, the two of them who had fortunately survived.

If that was what she wanted, Bivorio was willing to provide a home to her who had become aware of the same committed sins—it did not matter even if it were a result produced by a process of elimination out of limited choices—furthermore, maintaining her identity as a mother, maintaining an identity like a mother.

"Well then, before things get complicated, we should get moving. On the other hand, what should we do with this woman?"

Kururi pointed to the woman in the swimsuit. Once she regained consciousness, who knew what could happen? But they could not just leave her unattended. Bivorio, who deserved to die, felt that she was alive only because of these two girls' existences.

"—May I request your assistance? I'm fine myself so I can still walk."

"Really? I understand."

As Kururi knelt down beside the woman, Bivorio wondered about Oratorie.

"Oratorie... Why was she trying to hunt down and kill that boy?"

"I don't know. I remember her saying that killing him would allow her to find out your location... I don't really get it. But there's no point in dwelling on it. After all, the incident is over."

Just as Kururi lifted Oratorie onto her back—

"Where are you going?"

Fear-in-Cube was looking back this way while the girl in the bondage suit was speaking privately with Yamimagari Pakuaki.

Kururi narrowed her eyes slightly and said:

"I don't know, but anyway, I think it's a place where cursed tools of torture and execution cannot be found. If you want to take your revenge on us, we who have committed all sorts of atrocities... I'm sorry to say this while you're exhausted, but you'll have to play with me next time."

"If you're going somewhere I won't see you again, I don't mind at all. But what you say is true. I'm very exhausted right now and too tired to play with a girl like you. However, hearing your answer has made me recover my strength. Let me ask you—Will we meet again?"

The meaning of her question was very easy to understand.

"You think there will be a happy expression that a certain person wants to see? How confident you are. I have no interest in that..."

Kururi looked over her shoulder slightly towards Bivorio, perhaps for confirmation?

Bivorio nodded and said:

"Supposing it is allowed, I believe... It would be best... if that chance does not come up."

Fear-in-Cube ended up sighing deeply and waving her hand.

As though extremely astounded.

It also seemed like she was saying "How inane."

"Well said, that would be best. Of course, that 'supposing' is meaningless, because that chance will definitely not come up. In other words, I won't have to see you people ever again. Frankly, that's wonderful separation... Just hurry and go wherever you want to go!"

Then the motions of her hand changed as though she were shooing Bivorio's group to leave. At this moment, Yamimagari Pakuaki suddenly began to laugh like a maniac, attracting the silver-haired girl's attention. Then she never looked at Bivorio's group again—

Such disregard, such scorn, it was like a curse.

In the future beyond, Bivorio would never forget. Neither could she escape—Moreover, it was accompanied by intense pain. Only those particular words were capable of expressing what she wanted to say.

Cursed, Bivorio lightly saluted towards the back of the silver-haired girl, then turned around and left with Kururi.

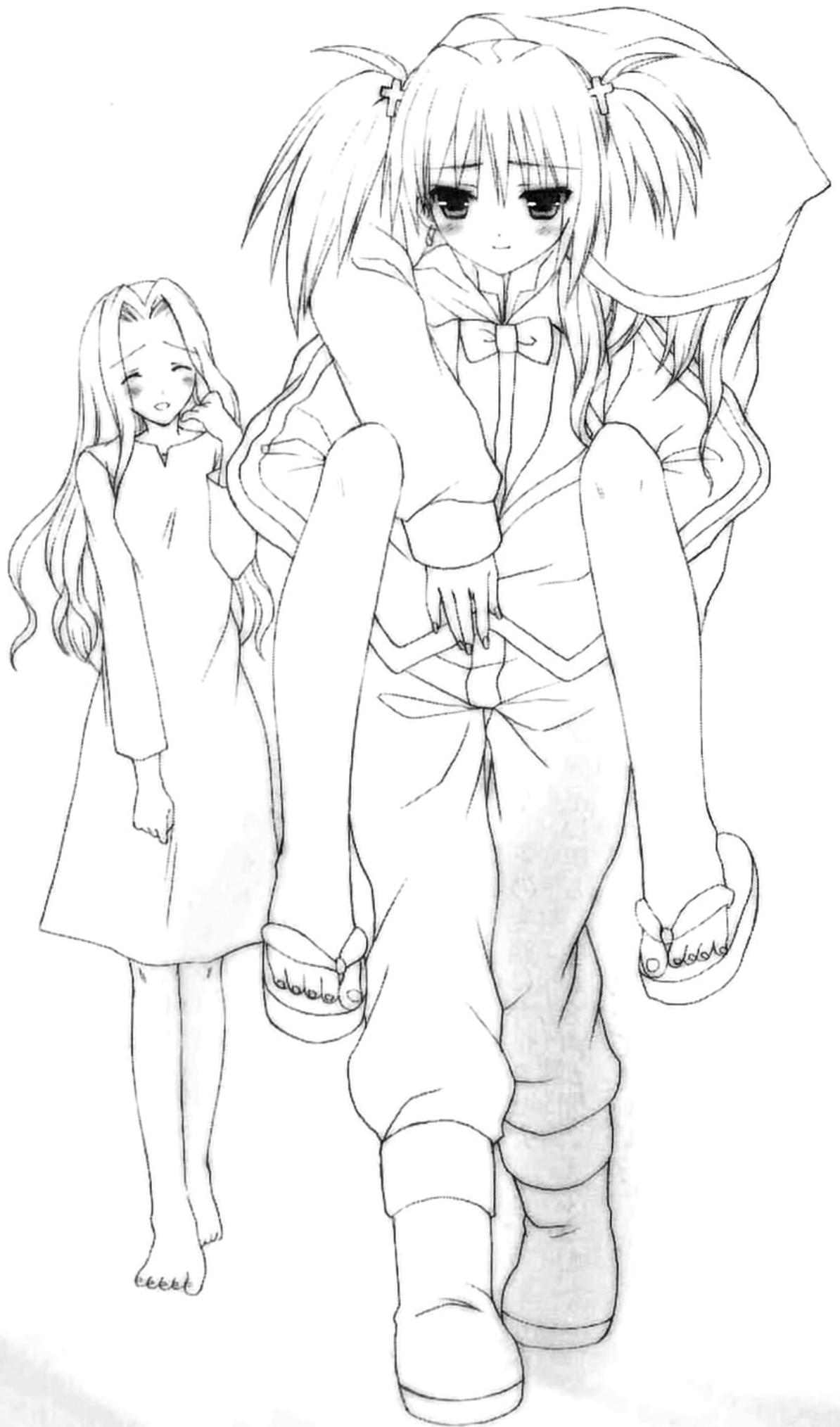
Exiting the training hall, she asked:

"Where are we going next?"

"Who knows. In my view, we should first go over to the river ahead."

Bivorio did not understand why. Just as she looked at Kururi in puzzlement, Kururi tugged at the mascot costume's collar and frowned:

"—I want to find a place to rest and cool down. This costume is too damned hot."



Bivorio smiled. She could not remember when exactly she had last giggled like this, far in the past.

Without any objections to Kururi's suggestion, she followed.

After a while, she realized that the cross' fragment had disappeared from her hand.

But she did not feel any desire to go back and search for it.

Part 7

Haruaki's group reported to Zenon what had happened and requested for her to handle the training hall's cleanup. As for the mascot costume stolen by Kururi, Zenon decided to pay the replacement fine by using the emergency fund the superintendent had entrusted her with. Publicly, the cover story was that despite the thief's capture, the mascot costume was irreparably damaged by the thief's perverted behavior, hence the thief was paying for the costume's replacement.

After ending the call to Zenon, the trio of Fear, Haruaki and Kirika returned to the infirmary and heard the following voices from inside:

"...Umm, Sovereignty, to be honest, this makes me super embarrassed. May I take it off now?"

"Eh—But I think it looks awesome! Actually at first I wasn't seriously suggesting it, but to think the doctor agreed to lend it to us so generously! It's such a refreshing new look, why don't you wear it longer?"

"Like I said~ In interpersonal relations, it's very important to overcome dreariness by keeping things fresh. Whether husband and wife, lovers or friends~ Ahhh~ This is very teacher-like counseling, but more importantly, I'm feeling very tired..."

Recalling Zenon's mentioning of Sovereignty cleaning up the infirmary, Haruaki opened the door. Entering his view were: the nicely tidied up infirmary, Ganon sitting on a bed with just a bare mattress, chewing Pocky idly, as well as—

"See, even the doctor says so, why don't you keep wearing it longer—Oh dear, Dr. Shiraho—I'm not feeling well, may I have a hug please—"

"...The demands of the curse? It can't be helped then, let's have a hug... Huh?"

The scene showed Sovereignty and Shiraho in embrace.

Perhaps because she had changed before coming back to clean up, Sovereignty was back in her usual female form with her maid outfit.

On the other hand, Shiraho was dressed up as a female doctor.

Borrowed from Ganon, presumably? The white coat really looked great on her. The glasses were probably Ganon's as well? Putting on airs like a doctor, Shiraho was sitting in a chair with her long and lovely legs crossed—Perhaps for enhancing the mood, she was also wearing fishnet tights for some reason. Then kneeling on the bed, Sovereignty had her face buried in Shiraho's chest. Even after Haruaki's group had entered, Sovereignty was still purring like a cat while Shiraho's face instantly turned bright red.

"W-What now? What are you looking at, human!?"

"N-Nothing, sorry! I never expected the situation inside to be like this! Or rather, I should say, you don't need to mind it. After all, I've been doing similar cosplay with these girls here at a nurse cafe!"

"Your attempt at covering for me is even more displeasing...!"

Behind those glasses, Haruaki could see eyes of contempt as though she were looking at an ant. Haruaki would rather die than consult this kind of female doctor who could very well step on him for displeasing her.

"I never thought you would enter without knocking, what a truly foolish human. If there existed a contest for foolish humans in this world, you will surely obtain victory without any judging required, don't worry. As for the prize for the champion, surely it must be the gallows, how marvelous."

Saying that, Shiraho took off the white coat and threw it at Ganon. Ganon went "Oh—?" and caught the garment with her face. With her head completely shrouded by the loose white coat, she continued to chew on her Pocky, how amazing. Then Shiraho swiftly removed the fishnet tights and casually tossed them away. After glaring at Haruaki who was frightened by the sudden sight of her bare, pristine, snow-white legs—

"...Okay, Sovereignty, let's go now!"

"Oh hey? Ah—It's Haruaki-kun. How did it go? Did things end smoothly?"

"We. Are. Going!"

Shiraho gruffly picked up her own socks from the table and scrunched them into a ball, then swiftly made her way out.

"By the way, Sovereignty, Zenon-san asked me to pass along a message. She wants you to make a trip back to the superintendent's office."

"Oh okay, understood—Wow, only now did I discover Fear-chan, you're hurt!? Are you okay!?"

Her uniform was tattered all over and her body was covered with bloodstains. Despite the wounds all over, Fear energetically puffed out her chest and answered:

"This is nothing, I'm very fine! Don't worry, most of it is already healed."

"Really—That's good I guess, but not good also, anyway, thank goodness..."

Shiraho deliberately clicked her tongue at this moment and dragged Sovereignty away by force. Just as the two of them were about to step out of the infirmary, Haruaki hastily called out to them.

"Hold on, let me say this again... I'm really sorry about today, but you two have helped us greatly. How should I say this? Perhaps it's embarrassing to say this, but I'm very proud to have you as my friends."

Her back facing Haruaki, Shiraho suddenly halted in her steps. Her shoulder shook slightly, perhaps she was sighing.

"You owe me a favor, human. Also, I never considered you people as my friends."

Without looking back, she continued softly:

"However, precisely because of that—I shall demand a return favor suitably, even with interest. The only reason why I am completely not bothered, without the slightest weight on my conscience, is grounded in your usefulness, understood in the slave sense, of course. Although I find it rather improbable, should you intend to accrue an even greater debt, please be reminded that you may be required to be prepared to die for it."

"Uh—? Lemme translate what Shiraho just said, basically, it means 'please feel free to ask for help if you have any troubles in the future'—"

Slam!

Sovereignty's smile and words were cut off by the infirmary door. Then the two of them were gone.

Haruaki's group smiled wryly and exchanged glances with one another.

Thinking "this friend is troublesome enough~"

Although the question crossed Haruaki's mind before, Ganon's knowledge of cursed tools probably came from either Zenon or the superintendent. While examining Fear's body which "should heal even if left alone," to Haruaki's surprise, she even helped Fear scrub the bloodstains beneath her clothes and applied simple treatment.

Kirika's wounds were essentially all healed and her uniform had not gotten dirty, so she sat on a bed and rested. At this moment, Sovereignty returned to the infirmary and lent Fear another uniform to change into. This was probably the reason why Zenon had summoned her to return.

Soon after, Fear's treatment was done and she had changed. From Haruaki's standpoint, he hoped that Fear could rest more, but in the end, Fear and Kirika insisted they were fine and pushed him back to the classroom.

Already after five in the afternoon, the school building was enveloped in a mood of fatigue and comfortable burnout. Walking through the corridor which was filled with the noise and bustle of people cleaning up, just as Haruaki's group returned to their classroom—

"Ahhh~ Found them—!"

Dressed in her uniform, Kana happened to walk out of the classroom. Confirming that it really was Haruaki and the rest, she puffed out her chest and deliberately pouted with a "Hmm!"

"Seriously, where did you guys run off to? Why did you disappear and skip out on your shifts in the second half? I saw Konohacchi return briefly, but I never thought she'd rummage through the cafe as though looking for something and then leaving immediately—"

Kana's grumbles prompted Haruaki to remember. Due to so many things happening, they had forgotten entirely about their shifts at the cafe. Haruaki eyed Konoha and whispered to her:

(You didn't explain to her?)

(H-How could I explain? I was desperately searching for the bomb at the time.)

At this moment, Kana pointed at the two of them strictly to say "Hey, listen to me seriously—" and continued:

"Even once the cleanup started, I still didn't see you guys return. If it were just Akki, I would have dismissed it as him doing his excessively nice guy act somewhere again. But even Kirika-chan was absent, what on earth is eeeeeeeeeeh!? Fear-chan, what's with the bandages on your body?"

Isn't that reaction too delayed? Seeing Fear's arms and legs wrapped in bandages, Kana stared wide-eyed.

"Uh—Umm, this is, this is that!"

Crap, I didn't even think up a reason. What now? What would be more natural but convincing as well? Hurry and think, think! I must answer before Fear comes up with a weird excuse.

Haruaki gestured to Fear with his eyes to say "Leave it to us" but—Too late.

"Th-This here~"

"Yes yes yes. What about it? What on earth happened?"

Fear went "Ah—Hmm—", moaning as she cast her gaze to one side. Scratching her face, she said:

"—I fell down the stairs."

That reason is way too cliched! If anyone believed that, Haruaki really wanted a good look at that person's face. Frantically, he racked his brain, thinking "I'd must find a way to back up her excuse."

"S-So I see!"

Kana believed her very readily. I'll just toss it up as Kana being "so simpleminded."

"It must have been tragic. Are you okay?"

"Of course I'm okay, they're just scrapes and scratches. I should be completely healed by tomorrow."

"I-I see. But you must have hit your head and fainted a while, right!?"

"I took her to the infirmary to rest and stayed there to take care of her—I had no choice but to neglect my duties, I'm very sorry about that."

Never expecting even Kirika to lie, Kana accepted their explanations and nodded. On the other hand, everyone felt rather guilty.

"I see now~ Well, if that's the reason, it can't be helped."

"Sorry, it's all my fault. So, I'm willing to work hard and take over the remaining cleanup..."

"It's fine, you don't have to push yourself—In principle, I'm just asking as a matter of procedure. To be honest, I can't get mad at you! This cafe's booming business is owed mostly to Fear-chan, Konohacchi and Kirika-chan! Many returning customers came back just for you three, so your contributions are the greatest! As long as you apologize properly, I'm sure everyone will forgive you. Probably... I guess—"

At this moment, Kana cackled maliciously.

"What's the matter, Kana? Of course, we want to apologize to everyone."

"That probably won't be enough—Hee hee hee, in fact, we all decided to delay the cleanup until a little while later. That's because we want to take photos to commemorate! A commemorative photo of the entire class! And for the three of you who are the most special, you are forced to wear those special outfits."

Hearing her words, Fear began to frown. Konoha and Kirika also suddenly became flustered.

"Nuu~ I need to wear a syringe on my back again?"

"M-Me too? I need to wear that hakama nurse outfit...?"

"What? A-A group photo, dressed up like that, that's really, umm—embarrassing..."

"You skipped your shifts, you three have no right to refuse! Relax, Konohacchi, after all, there are quite a few girls wearing the same nurse outfits. However, it's just that none of them can match the violence of your figure!"

While saying "Okay, let's go, let's go," Kana pulled Kirika and Konoha into the classroom. Following behind them slowly, Haruaki and Fear exchanged glances.

"How troubling. But if the punishment for skipping shifts consists only of cosplay photos, that should be considered quite light. After all, it's not every day that we hold a cultural festival, of course we want it to conclude happily... However, there's still the after party once cleanup is done."

"What's the after party? I think I heard it somewhere before."

"They have a bonfire at the sports ground where people can dance and chat. Since some of the homerooms might go out for a celebratory drink after the festival, the school probably decided they might as well provide a place to celebrate."

Fear nodded with great interest. To this girl, every first experience was very interesting. Haruaki suddenly remembered something at this moment—

"How did you find the cultural festival?"

"Hmm, many things happened and unfortunately, I only got to participate in just a small part... But it was very fun. It felt really happy to work with everyone to finish something together."

"It's really great that you can understand what it means to be happy. I'm sure next time, you'll also work hard towards your own happiness."

"Next time huh... That's true. Kirika also managed to stay here without issue. Hmm, there are really many things to look forward to!"

Fear entered the classroom, full of smiles.

Haruaki also entered the room shortly after. Then suddenly he remembered something—Just now, Fear had mentioned "Kirika also managed to stay here without issue."

Speaking of which—

How on earth did she manage to convince Pakuaki to give up on her...?

Part 8

The sky was already quite dark.

"Heave-ho!"

Sounding like an old man, Haruaki tossed garbage bags into the incinerator located in a corner of the school. Cleanup was reaching its final stages. After making several trips back and forth already, the task of trash disposal was also about to conclude.

Next, he could sense the sports ground getting noisier and noisier, because the after party was about to start. Did the more impatient homerooms run outside to gather this quickly already? Having already fooled around that much during the day, they sure are energetic.

On the other hand, so much had happened on Haruaki's side, hence he was dead tired. He could not suppress the yawns coming from his throat.

As Haruaki yawned in succession, he really felt like sitting down to rest... Looks like I'll have to rest during the after party. Since every class will lay out tarps, I could probably lie down for a bit—No, sleeping is probably not allowed.

Just as Haruaki smiled wryly and said "I'll tough it out a bit longer," and yawned again...

"...Yachi."

"Oh... Class Rep, you're here to throw out garbage too?"

Although he asked that, Kirika did not seem like she was throwing garbage away because there were no garbage bags in her hands. Furthermore, she was acting a little furtive and awkward.

"No, how should I say this...? I have something... to say to you, are you... free right now?"

"Yeah I'm free, after all, most of the garbage should be cleaned up... But the after party starts soon."

"I know, so I'll be quick. Come, follow me."

"Eh? Hey, I'm coming even if you don't drag me—Speaking of which, can't we just talk here?"

"Of course not!"

Circling around the school building, the pair moved over to a deserted area behind the school.

"Since we're in a hurry, let's go up directly. The roof."

"Eh, directly to the roof, what do you mean... Ah—!"

The «Tragic Black River» suddenly slithered out and wrapped around Haruaki's waist while its tip continued to extend towards the roof and entangled a fence, contracting with Haruaki caught in its midsection. Then Haruaki experienced an extremely terrifying feeling of suspension as they ascended—Finally pausing just before the fence for Kirika to ascertain there was no one on the roof. Then crossing over the fence, Haruaki finally stepped on solid concrete again.

"Gah, that was really scary...! Class Rep, give me some time for mental preparation if you're going to do that!"

"D-Didn't I say we're in a hurry?"

"Even so, you didn't need to go this far... Actually, I wanted to say many things like 'Let's take the stairs' or 'Can't we talk down below?' etc but never mind, it's over anyway. Okay, what did you want to talk to me about?"

"H-Hmm, let's sit down here first."

At Kirika's urging, Haruaki sat down in a corner of the roof. Kirika also took a seat beside him with a delicate distance between them. Haruaki could hear her taking a few deep breaths as though calming herself down.

"Ah... First of all, I'd like to thank you. I've added a lot to your troubles today... So, thank you for taking care of me, thank you very much."

Haruaki smiled wryly: "What the heck, it turns out to be this?"

"You don't have to say thanks or anything. After all, I didn't do very much. You should thank Fear and the others instead."

"...You're right. I also intend to thank them properly. All of you tried so hard, risking your lives to rescue me. I'm very glad."

"You placed your life on the line too, so I think it's only natural for us to do that."

Haruaki's relaxed tone of voice prompted a sigh from Kirika.

"You're right, I also... placed my life on the line... I don't want to go back no matter what, that's why I went that far. It's not like I enjoy pain, but I had no other choice."

"Oh, that's right! I remember that, but I forgot to ask because there were too many things going on—Umm, was your plan really to proactively get yourself stabbed by the knife? Why did you have to do that? Class Rep."

"...In order to win, that was the only way."

"What I mean is: that can't count as a solution, right? A plan that relies on deliberately causing pain to yourself, isn't that too outrageous? When you insisted on assigning roles to us, it was for that, right? ...Jeez."

"After all, it's already over."

"Because it's over, that's why it makes me feel uncomfortable. Oh man—Damn it, I should have stopped you through forceful means. Had I known, I surely would have changed the distribution of roles."

Haruaki gulped in the process. Then he heard Kirika's voice.

"Umm... Are you angry?"

"Quite angry, and also angry at myself for not stopping you. I beg you, please don't do something like that again."

"If I did it again, what would you do?"

"I'll get angry again. Oh right... You're hereby sentenced to forehead flicking. Hence, this is for today."

Kirika happened to have sat down beside him within arm's reach. Hence, Haruaki extended his hand and flicked her on the forehead with a "smack."

"I'm really begging you, please don't make me worry so much, even if you have an immortal body—When I saw the blood gushing from your heart, I was so scared my heart almost stopped. Hmm, what's wrong, Class Rep? Sorry, did I flick too hard?"

"Hmm..."

For some reason, Kirika had turned her body and her face away. While presenting her back towards Haruaki, she was resting her face on her hands while her body trembled. What's going on, did something happen? Haruaki had caught a glimpse of Kirika's face for an instant after flicking her forehead and she seemed unimaginably more relaxed than her usual self—She shouldn't be the type to feel happy about being scolded, were his nerves acting up?

"Class Rep, are you okay?"

"N-Nothing... I'm... completely... fine. Hu... ha... Hmm, right, I'm fine!"

Haruaki heard her breathe in and out many times, then suddenly she turned herself towards him again. As he thought, the earlier expression he saw must have been an illusion. Because right now, she was displaying a furious expression with lips pursed, eyes widened and eyebrows raised. What an exaggerated expression of anger, it almost felt as though she were making it deliberately.

"Uwoah! S-Sorry."

"No, it's fine. You are right, I did something that angered you. So you don't need to apologize. After all, that's just how it goes. I'm done with what I wanted to say today. How absolutely ridiculous!"

Her face kept twitching. Were her emotions about to explode? If not, then it looked as though she were desperately suppressing the urge to laugh, but of course, that could not possibly be happening.

(After all, she did that for everyone's sake... But it's my sincere feeling that I don't want her to hurt herself. In any case, even if I offended her, it can't be helped.)

Haruaki decided to withhold his advice of telling her to caution herself. He simply sighed and accepted her wrath. But being glared by her like this was really not good for his heart. Hence deliberately avoiding Kirika's gaze as she sat beside him, he looked up towards the sky. The sun was almost completely set. The sky above had already turned into a vast expanse of navy blue, resembling one of those dome-shaped ceilings in planetarium theaters.

For some reason, Kirika fell silent and did not speak. All Haruaki could hear was the comfortable sound of the cool breeze.

After a long long silence.

(...Yawn.)

Haruaki felt his eyelids growing heavier and heavier. Just as he was thinking about finding a place to sit down and rest, this dark roof turned out to be a location that was easy on the eyes. Crap, even sitting upright on the hard concrete floor, he was beginning to feel as though it were a luxury chair. He felt his entire body sinking, slowly sinking. How much time had passed since their last dialogue? Five minutes? Ten minutes? Or maybe only a minute?

"S-Say, Yachi, let's get back to the main point—"

Class Rep was about to say something, I must wake up. Otherwise, it'd be too impolite, I must wake up...

Hmm, Class Rep. What's up?

"...Yachi?"

He could not believe that Kirika failed to hear his voice. Hence, he tried to vibrate his vocal cords again.

But he had already reached his limit.

His consciousness ended up switching up—

Then he could not hear anything more.

Kirika murmured to herself, absolutely ridiculous.

Sitting with his knees drawn up, Haruaki had fallen asleep with his cheek resting against his lap. Accompanied by the sound of his breathing noises, he was completely unconscious. Also, his head was turned, giving a clear view of his stupid sleeping face.

"Absolutely ridiculous...!"

She muttered again, feeling a surge of anger rising. Easygoing, too easygoing.

"...I'm angry. That's right, I'm angry, Yachi! And there are quite a few reasons for that. First of all, your punishment did hurt just now, so this is purely for revenge!"

Kirika's tone of voice was forceful but did not escape the realm of whispers. These words were completely not enunciated.

Approaching Haruaki on her knees, she reached out with a grim expression and flicked towards his forehead.

It missed, because Kirika missed intentionally.

She had flicked her finger into empty space without even touching his bangs. Kirika imagined a look of pain on his face but that was not satisfying enough.

"Second of all, it's about what made you angry! Whenever there is a need, I'm still going to do it, as many times as necessary. Even though I know it isn't right, for the sake of my righteous desires, I will still resort to that move no matter how many times it takes! If you want to be mad at me, that's your problem, but be prepared. I'll pay you back with my anger like this every time!"

Drawing her face even closer, this time, she aimed a flick at his nose.

A nose flick separated by the air.

In her imagination, he yelled in pain while laughing "You win okay, I get it now." How could there exist such an easygoing guy who was excessively nice to a fault? Of course, she was not satisfied yet either.

"Third of all, I can't forgive you for the third reason! Basically, you—"

Of course, she had already decided what she needed to do.

Still on her knees, she slightly drew herself even closer to him.

Like the previous two times—but this time, she was quite hesitant until the very very last second—she decided on her next target while thinking "Oh no~ I can't do it, this really is my limit" in escapism.

Then she held her breath.

His cheek. Her very own lips. They made contact.

"Huff... Ah..."

She had no idea herself how many seconds she spent on that action.

Slowly, slowly, she separated from him.

Then she collapsed and sat on the floor, looking down as she murmured to herself.

"That's... because you... leave too many openings... for others to take advantage..."

In the beginning, she planned on saying "this is your reward as my thanks for helping me" while carrying out the act forcefully. She originally planned to use that as an excuse because she felt compelled to do it.

She had already prepared herself mentally.

She had also prepared herself for what could happen afterwards or the end result.

However—

To think he would fall asleep in such an unguarded state—Doesn't that mean she can't do as planned anymore?



Kirika did not have the courage to let this perfect opportunity slip past "unused." Amidst feelings of desperation, in fact, her initially decided target was not his cheek... But in the end, she lost to her feelings of terror that even she could not understand herself. Good heavens, when did I become such a coward?

No, it's fine. Since everything had ended, it's fine, anyway... Anyway—

"Hmm..."

Kirika stood up without waking up Haruaki. Feeling a painful throbbing, she ran forward. She discovered faint light in front of the fence and could hear Oklahoma Mixer music in the background. Was the after party starting? What was he going to do? Was he going to get up immediately? If after waiting a long time for him and he still doesn't go to the after party, I'll just say I left him to sleep on the roof and left first—Kirika used the paltry remainder of calmness in her mind to ponder, but very soon, the rhythm of her heart instantly shot up.

In any case, all she could think of was leaving this place, leaving him.

If she did not do that, she could very well die.

Hence, Kirika opened and went through the metal door to the school building, then closed it softly. Exhaling as she leaned back on the door, she held her hand to her chest to suppress the beating within. At this moment, a sense of reality suddenly surged forth.

—I did it. I really... did it.

"Phew... Huff~ Ah..."

Calm down, I must calm down. Putting emotions aside for now, I must consider the logical side of things.

Indeed, although it did not go as initially planned, there should not be any problems.

There were no problems with this time or place.

She had provided concrete evidence and fulfilled the despicable condition that man had proposed—Could you show me a kiss? Kirika had no idea where he was observing from, but that man definitely saw it, so this was fine. In that case, she would not be taken back to the Lab Chief's Nation.

"Ha... Haha, serves me right..."

The worst memories, carved into the innermost depths of her mind, surfaced choppily in her mind. A sudden sense of touch, the arm she pushed away due to revulsion of that touch, that man's smiles and words. Hmm~ So this kind of feelings exists? Another unknown demolished, thank you, Kirika.

Clearly it had happened many years ago, but simply remembering these fragments of memories—Past feelings of terror were finally reappearing vividly as though she had just heard those words.

She could not allow him to know that sense of terror. She could not allow him to know how terrifying he was in his mindset of desiring to investigate thousands of unknowns. Hence, she absolutely could not allow him to know the reason why she refused to return to that man's side no matter what.

However, she had finally taken revenge. It took a great deal of effort to replace those memories of the worst kind.

Although it was done for a reason...

Although she almost backed out in fear and only managed it due to luck...

But this was definitely—

"This was... My first kiss."

Kirika gently caressed her lips with her fingers.

Then she rushed down the stairs with leaping steps.

Meanwhile.

Konoha was behind the water tower on the roof. She had been looking for Haruaki to join the after party, hence she followed him when he went out to dispose of the garbage. Finding Haruaki and Kirika acting strangely, she tailed them, climbed onto the roof using a drainpipe and saw—

"...That kind of thing, I already knew a long time ago."

Then there were Kirika's feelings of love she had hidden in her heart.

Konoha had eavesdropped with her superhuman hearing. She also did the same back during Kirika's conversation with Pakuaki.

Hence, Konoha knew what she was going to do.

Konoha renewed her thoughts. "What a formidable rival she is..." Although it crossed her mind, she left it at that.

"As expected of a cultural festival, so many things happened. However... I won't admit defeat."

Leaning back against the water tower, Konoha smiled wryly as she watched the sky lit up by the bonfire. She raised her hand as though trying to pierce the brightest star in the sky. This hand that was stained with the blood of babies, pregnant women and the elderly in the past. She knew she was filthy but consequently she greatly desired things of purity and cleanliness and looked forward to things of purity and cleanliness. She believed in cleanliness and purity.

Whether in lifestyle—or love.

Indeed, only by winning fair and square would her love have meaning.

Hence, nothing would change. She simply thought to herself, "I will try even harder than before."

"...Very well, time for me to get going."

In any case, she had decided what she would do next.

Going downstairs from here, pretending to look for Haruaki all over the place, then finally finding him here and waking him up.

Then with their usual expressions, with their usual attitudes, the two of them would join the after party.

Then before anyone else could do so, she would invite him to dance.

—Not long before Konoha was smiling wryly at the night sky, in other words, while Kirika was still on the roof.

Fear was also watching the same scene through the metal door that was slightly ajar.

Like Konoha, she had gone searching for Haruaki and just by coincidence, she witnessed the scene on the roof.

"Eh... How strange... Oh...?"

She pressed one hand tightly against her chest.

She could not understand.

No idea what was going on.

Kirika's lips had merely touched Haruaki's cheek. That was all.

Then why, why was her heart hurting so much?

Epilogue

Part 1

A sickroom on a certain night. This was not a shop in the cultural festival but a sickroom in an actual hospital.

There were two men. One was a man in a patient's gown with creepy long hair, sitting up on the sickbed. The other man had even longer hair and was dressed in a black lab coat. He was sitting in the pipe chair by the bed.

The man in the chair—Pakuaki—took out a mask from his bag and placed it on the bed.

"Let me return this to you first, Himura-kun. It turned out to be quite fortunate that I borrowed this from you. It did help me out a great deal indeed."

"Really? I'm happy that it came in handy, Lab Chief."

Himura nodded lightly as he answered quietly.

"Sorry for making so many visits. I hope I haven't hindered you from recuperating."

"Don't say that, I'm very happy you visited me personally, Lab Chief."

"This implies that I recognize your worth, as well as the exhausting work required of my sister's partner... Also, I appreciate your capabilities. Your observation reports have always been very accurate and I'm especially interested in that research report regarding «Il est dans Bastille». Compared to the beginning, our understanding of it has advanced greatly, such as only transmitting the voice, or the sense of presence manifesting when one is too forceful—like emanating murderous intent, for example. Looks like it cannot be used for assassination purposes, what a shame."

Himura's expression remained unchanged. The quiet and unassuming man, whose presence could easily be neglected if one did not pay particular attention, simply nodded lightly in response.

"However—I would advise you to pay more attention to its curse, okay? Because your sense of presence has already diluted to the point that you don't even need to wear the mask. We are researchers, not fanatical zealots like those from the Family. Once you acknowledge there's a risk, I

will approve transferring all rights of ownership back to the Lab Chief's Nation."

"...Yes, I know."

"Good for you. That's it, so please don't worry too much. It's not like I'm threatening you that 'you'll instantly lose awareness of your own existence.' I'm simply warning you as your boss. If you're using it for observation or research, that's fine, but I hope you won't indulge in matters of amusement. Indeed, take for example—"

Pakuaki spoke in nonchalant tone of voice.

As though it were common knowledge.

"Helping Oratorie Rabdulmunagh escape from the branch lab, or anything of that sort?"

"Hmm—"

Himura was visibly shaken while Pakuaki began to giggle.

"If she were to regain her freedom, one would predict that she would attempt to locate Bivorio in order to obtain further orders. Hence you made a deal with her, right? If she proceeded to kill the boy you indicated, you will tell her Bivorio's location. Also, you'll let her roam free. And since I borrowed this thing from you this morning, hmm~ It really was quite tight in timing, how dangerous."

"..."

"Okay, what would be your reason for doing so? Of course, I also know why. The feeling of converting unknowns into knowns is wonderful—I knew about your infatuation with Kirika from a long time ago. Despite the accuracy of your reports, to this date, you've never written a single sentence regarding whom Kirika held feelings of love for, right? How very strange~ As Kirika's partner, always hanging by her side, you were supposed to report immediately if anything happened."

Pakuaki stood up from his chair and started pacing aimlessly in the sickroom. After wandering for a few rounds, he happened to stop in front of the window. Looking outside, he took out a packet of CalorieMate from his pocket and started eating.

"...You must have expected it all along. Once I came here to take Kirika back, she would play the hand of revealing her feelings of love. When that happened, what would I do? Haha, just as you predicted, I acknowledged her idea and relented. Because, isn't this very interesting? That Kirika, the Kirika who could not free herself from Wathes, to think she would actually fall in love with someone by her own volition."

Staring into the darkening sky outside the window, Pakuaki's hair and shoulders shook as he laughed:

"Then, this is probably what you proceeded to think, right? Once I found out about Kirika, I'd find it amusing and would try to fan the flames, perhaps even going as far as to help her feelings bear fruit—Hmm, regarding that, it's a little different. I am a researcher. Even though she is my little sister, I won't easily interfere in the matters of the subject under observation. Logically speaking, you should know that very well... However, if there's no further progress, perhaps I might consider it. After all, it's quite natural to add reagents to an unreactive test tube whose development is stalled."

He bit into the second piece of CalorieMate, thereby ingesting another 100 calories.

"This resulted in a sense of crisis for you. As to what kind of crisis, I won't say it out in consideration of your personal reputation. Due to that sense of crisis, you decided to use Oratorie to kill a boy. Doing the deed yourself was a no-go. Also, the aforementioned mask cannot be used for assassination. More importantly, you needed to find someone completely unrelated to you to kill that boy. In actual fact, that kind of ugly mindset is common to every person... But something must have happened to spur you to make that decision, right? For example, Kirika might have said something when she caused your injuries."

"..."

"According to my observations, her intent to kill you isn't extremely clear and well-defined. Probably on the level of 'if possible, I hope he'll die.' But that was still quite a bold move on her part."

At this moment, Pakuaki shifted his gaze to the glass window before him, because it was reflecting the image of the silent Himura in bed, staring at Pakuaki's back.

"You have questions? Go ahead, questions are very important. Students in recent times don't like asking questions. It's very troubling."

"Researcher... Ueno... Is it really true?"

"Indeed, hence she is now listed as a subject under observation and cannot be repatriated. Although under the Lab Chief's authority she still belongs to the Lab Chief's Nation, in actual fact, she's no longer one of us. As for your job—as the partner in charge of reporting on Fear-in-Cube, I think I'll need to replace you with someone else. However, I'm still considering who to choose, in any case, it'll all have to wait until you're discharged from the hospital."

Himura's eyes, reflected on the dark window, showed a gaze of doubt.

"...I won't be punished?"

"Didn't I mention already? You're an excellent researcher. Also, like in this incident, you also became a cause for new unknowns, isn't that interesting? So I won't punish you specifically, however—"

Pakuaki suddenly turned around. Leaning forward, he brought his face close to Himura on the sickbed, still wearing a faint smile on his face. However, his eyes were cold and merciless. Furthermore, he was so close that Himura could hear the sound of his breathing.

"From now on, I absolutely forbid you from making any attempts to kill Yachi Haruaki."

"...!"

"Of course, that includes indirect means as well. Because of you, I was forced to send Un Izoey to save him. Kirika herself can die any number of times, that's not a problem. But at least within my view, I absolutely forbid him from being killed. He is a very important research subject. I'm currently very busy so I'll set it aside for now, but sooner or later, I will probably research him seriously. A constitution immune to curses—Isn't that intriguing? How could I let such a rare and useful guinea pig go to waste just because of your personal lust, understand? Answer me if you understand."

Holding his breath, Himura looked down and remained silent. His long and swaying hair rustling.

After several seconds of silence—

"I... understand."

"Yes, very well."

Pakuaki smiled like a child and stood up from the bedside. Sticking his hands into his pockets, he walked towards the door with brisk footsteps.

"By the way, one final reminder. Although it should be totally obvious—"

Pakuaki looked back as he rested his hand on the door handle:

"—If you want to pursue love, then fight seriously. There's no secret trick to it."

Then he waved ostentatiously as the black lab coat disappeared outside the sickroom.

After the door closed, only silence remained.

Silence.

Silence.

Then the sound of a fist striking the bed hard.

Part 2

The next day after the cultural festival, at the Yachi residence's living room...

"Uh~ Kuroe... W-What's with you?"

"K-Kuroe-san—? I've prepared very tasty tea~ W-Would you like to have some together?"

"..."

Completely ignoring Haruaki and Konoha's calls, Kuroe simply lay on her side on the tatami, only showing her petite back towards the two of them. At this moment, a bundle of her hair slid down and began to casually and aimlessly write the character for "person" repeatedly on the tatami... Although Haruaki was convinced that there were errors in the written characters, Kuroe was giving off intense vibes of sulking.

Furthermore, the sighing coming from the other side of her back continued nonstop.

"Sigh..."

"S-Say, Kuroe, I can understand how you feel, but it can't be helped that the cultural festival has already ended."

"..."

"It's really a shame you couldn't come because the shop was too busy, but there will be another cultural festival next year... Besides, isn't it a good thing that the shop's business is booming?"

"Pweh—"

"...Pweh—?"

Haruaki had no idea why she was making strange sounds but her symptoms were really severe. Precisely because Kuroe really loved happy events, everyone could understand her regrets for being unable to attend the cultural festival. However, the event was already over so they tried to cheer her up.

"So... Is there any show you wanted to see? Although I'm not too sure what you're interested in, the drama club's public performance should have some recordings, I'll ask someone..."

"N-No! Absolutely not! U-Umm... I'm sorry but it was a very absurd failure of a product! There was a weirdo box woman who suddenly appeared and disappeared! It's better that you don't watch it, that's the honest truth!"

"Oh~ Why would you oppose so vehemently?"

"...I..."

Kuroe whispered carelessly as Haruaki and Konoha listened attentively.

Her hair that was originally tracing words on the tatami collapsed as if out of energy.

"Yesterday, I... was essentially like air..."

Just as Haruaki and Konoha exchanged glances of "What's that supposed to mean?"—

"Didn't many things happen yesterday? But... Haru, you guys were in trouble but I couldn't help out. That makes me... feel... so bad..."

Her face was still turned away but her words did come directly from the heart.

Haruaki and Konoha smiled at the same time:

"I'm very glad you wanted to help, but really, please don't let it weigh on your mind."

"Yeah, after all, things ended on a happy note, right? Doesn't it feel better if you think of it as things getting handled without requiring any troublesome effort on your part?"

"Not just that... Umm, my greatest regret is..."

Kuroe deliberately stretched out her sigh and muttered. Full of emotion and forcefulness, her mutterings were completely different from her past image of eccentricity.

"Not being able to see Ficchi and Kono-san's nurse outfits or Haru's white coat look! That's my greatest regret...! Ahhh, m-my life... is over... Cannot be saved. This absolutely awful feeling is like pre-ordering a first edition collector's limited version but receiving the normal edition for some reason...!"

"In the end, that's your greatest disappointment!?"

"A-Actually, it wasn't as great as you think, umm, anyway it was really embarrassing... So don't feel so depressed! S-Say, Fear-san, you should convince her too!"

Konoha looked back at Fear who was lying on her back, staring at the ceiling blankly as though in deep thought. She also kept turning her Rubik's cube, resulting in a continuous stream of clicking sounds. Fear had been acting strange since the previous night, even during the after party. Haruaki originally thought she would accept invitations from Kana and the rest to dance and make merry, but Fear ended up only chatting half-heartedly and drinking juice in a daze. He had no idea why she would act like that.

"...Hmm—"

"Sigh~ She's no help at all... Is this what's known as burnout syndrome?"

"...Hmm—"

An inattentive answer, accompanied by the clicking of a toy. What a disaster. Fear was no help at all.

"Oh right! I remember we had photos taken! We'll send you a copy once they're printed!"

"That goes without saying. Of course I'll take them. However, that's not quite enough... What I actually want to experience is the atmosphere, the atmosphere of a nurse cafe in the cultural festival."

"You say you want to experience the atmosphere, but..."

"I know it's very willful of me, but it can't be helped. So, it's okay... Haru, you don't need to mind me, just carry on with your happy conversation about the memories of the cultural festival..."

The mood felt as though a mysterious sound effect of ijii could almost be heard. Even photos were no good?

"Ahhh~ Seriously... Kuroe, you have to pull yourself together. I'll do anything in my ability to help. How about tonight's dinner, would you like to try some yakisoba fried noodles in the style of cultural festival stalls?"

"—You said... You'll do anything to help?"

Kuroe turned and looked at Haruaki over her shoulder for the first time. Haruaki felt an ominous feeling. He probably said something wrong.

Haruaki looked towards Konoha for help but she muttered "Haruaki-kun, there you go again..." as she pressed her hand against her temple. Then Kuroe slowly squirmed and got up, sitting formally on the tatami in seiza, staring straight at Haruaki in serious but blank manner, then—

"So, let's begin now—We'll play a game of doctors and nurses."

"Wait a sec, how could you say that with full seriousness? It's very troubling."

However, Kuroe was not dissuaded.

"...Didn't you just say you'd do anything to help me? Haru... Were you... deceiving... me?"

"Ugh!"

"Since I can't experience a nurse cafe, then at least let me feel the atmosphere of a hospital game. So that's why I'm proposing a game of doctors and nurses... Sob sob, I'll be very depressed if this continues, or rather, I'll feel unwell, Dr. Haru..."

"You're starting the game immediately whether or not I consent!?"

Standing on her knees, Kuroe slowly approached, then for some reason, she started flipping up her skirt.

"Could you look here? Doctor... I feel... unwell here..."

"W-What the heck are you doing!?"

"I suddenly feel... itchy here... It feels uncomfortable if I don't finger it. It also burns and hurts like hell unless I finger it like mad... Starting yesterday, I had to finger it many many times..."

Kuroe's gaze looked up while her rising skirt continued to shake. If her hem rose a few more millimeters, the part above her thighs was going to be exposed in full view. In other words, her thighs were currently revealed to a high degree. Smooth, tender, well-shaped, pale, but there was one reddened spot—

Kuroe suddenly returned to normal.

"In other words, I was bitten by a mosquito out of season. Haru, would you apply some ointment for me?"

"You should know where the bug bite ointment is kept! Do it yourself—Ouch, that hurts!"

"Immorality Breaker (Visual Variant)... Do not get careless, Haruaki-kun. And you, Kuroe-san, of course I cannot allow Haruaki-kun to do that! I'll help you apply the ointment, please instantly terminate this indecent game of doctors and nurses!"

"Eh—or how about I'll be the nurse this time. In other words, the next patient is Kono-san. Kono-san, where would you like Dr. Haru to examine you—"

Freeze frame.

Then—a gulp.

"...Konoha, did you just swallow hard...?"

"W-What are you talking about, Haruaki-kun? Aha... Ahahaha. I didn't do anything at all."

"Then switch afterwards and you can examine Haru. Whether measuring body temperature or feeling his pulse, in any case, you can examine any place you want on his entire body."

"Y-You want me to examine... Haruaki-kun's body...!"

Then Konoha removed her palms that were covering Haruaki's eyes. Clearing her throat—she then spoke with a smile:

"Kuroe-san, you're indeed a very important member of the family. Even I find it necessary to revive your spirits through a game of doctors and nurses. Good idea, this game of doctors and nurses. Excellent, this game of doctor and nurses. Very well, let's continue."

"I don't really get what you're talking about, but it looks like my enemies have further increased by one!"

Next, Kuroe and Konoha laughed creepily with unknown intentions as they slowly approached Haruaki. Seeking help, Haruaki looked around him but—

Fear was still doing nothing but swiveling the Rubik's cube, spacing out and staring at the ceiling.

Part 3

—While Fear was looking up at the ceiling, she recalled what had happened the previous night. She recalled asking Haruaki to insert the Indulgence Disk, resulting in the sealing of the «The Duke of Exeter's Daughter».

As well as a trivial matter that happened at the time—

"Woah, this is dark! Why do you have the light off? How am I suppose to insert it like this?"

"W-What does it matter? I just don't want the light on right now, okay!? If you can't see, just go grab that thing called a flashlight."

Haruaki grumbled as he exited the room while Fear sighed in her cube form. Although she was asked why she wanted the light off, she did not actually know the answer. She felt strange today, in many different ways.

For example, asking Haruaki to help insert the Indulgence Disk was a perfectly ordinary matter, but for some reason, just today, she found herself making strange faces or saying strange things. Hence, she had no choice but to leave the light off. But in actual fact, her expressions could not be seen since her face was part of a cube—It was a matter of mood.

Then Haruaki returned and began his usual task.

Haruaki manipulated her body and exposed her deepest part.

"Hmm—I can't see very clearly. Well then, I should take this and..."

Fear had miscalculated. Although Haruaki could not see her face, she was still able to see his face clearly. His serious face. Due to the detailed work required but having nothing but a flashlight's illumination, one could hardly blame him for concentrating so hard. Within this pitch-black room of darkness, all she could see was his face. Although the strange feelings in her heart grew even weirder, she could not ask him to switch the light on now, right?

"Okay, I'm going to insert it now."

"Oh, okay. B-Be more gentle, do it slowly. Don't... be too rough..."

"I know. I'll do it slowly, slowly—"

"Mmm... Ah, nnngggh..."

Slowly, it was inserted. Holding the object, Haruaki slowly pushed it in, rubbing against the inside of her body.

It still hurt a bit.

Enduring the pain which would have caused her to clench her fist if she had a hand currently, she glanced in trepidation towards Haruaki's face in an observing manner, taking a partial look which would be conducted with one eye closed if she had eyes right now. He really was very serious. He was still using the flashlight to illuminate and peer into her most private spot. I clearly asked him not to bring his face so close—Because his exhaled breath would touch her slightly. And for some reason, she even felt her spine trembling repeatedly.

"Just a little bit more. So, I'm going to plug it all the way in, okay..."

"Ah, yes... Hmm. I know, I know, so, hurry up... and push... oh!"

Inserted, it was inserted all the way in.

Then as usual, she was overcome with an indescribable sense of fatigue and burnout—Plus another feeling throughout her entire body that she was not certain of. Although it was definitely not unpleasant, for some reason, she was slightly scared of this process that she did not actually find unpleasant.

"I-If you're done, hurry... and remove your hand. You... shameless brat... H-Hmph!"

"Yes yes yes, it's been a long day for you. Ah—Why do my eyes hurt now? My sight definitely worsened."

As Haruaki's hands manipulated her very sensitive parts, they automatically closed up with clicking sounds. Just as she thought "finally done without any issues" and breathed with relief—

"Then I'm off. Although it's become a perfectly ordinary task, do speak up if you feel anything strange. Hmm! Ouch that hurts, my legs are numb...!"

Perhaps because he was working while kneeling in a posture akin to seiza, Haruaki could not stand steadily when he got up. Also due to the darkness of the room perhaps, he had struck the cube with his numb foot and was overcome with pain. Haruaki lost balance slightly—waving his hands about, he grabbed the metal cube to support himself but that motion caused his face to descend from the momentum—

Kiss.

(—★†♦□💀!?)

His lips touched her metal skin, they touched. Instantly, she felt an inexplicable shock running through her entire body, accompanied by a rising temperature of unknown meaning. It felt as hot as boiling water. Even when scorched by the fire for the «Voices of the Brazen Bull», she had never felt this hot. I get it now, these are lips—So what I saw on the roof that time was the touch of lips?

"Guah, m-my legs, so numb, finally... Phew~ Ah, s-sorry, Fear. Are you okay...?"

Haruaki hastily stood up, terrified for some reason. Was he worrying about which body part he had grabbed in desperation to support his weight? Of course, Fear would definitely throw a tantrum under normal

circumstances—but for some unknown reason, she currently did not feel any anger at all.

Haruaki did not seem like he minded what had just happened. Perhaps he did not realize what occurred? Or perhaps, touching someone else's body with his lips was nothing to him? No, he probably failed to notice? It was for an instant, happening by chance... An accident.

Indeed, hence—

Fear looked up at the living room ceiling, experiencing the noise surrounding her.

Meanwhile, she continued to swivel the Rubik's cube.

Thinking over it calmly, she recalled seeing it on television, so she knew what kind of behavior kisses were. How should it be described? She knew it was something done only between people who loved each other.

But Haruaki and Kirika probably were not like that, right? They had not done any of those things on television, such as shameless acts performed while stuck together inseparably, gazing into each other's eyes, yelling at each other when talking over the cellphone, or even embracing inexplicably under the rain. In short, kissing should be something that occurred between people in a relationship like Shiraho and Sovereignty.

But why? What was that scene she had witnessed on the roof?

(Hmm, this is question number one. However, at least I now know what it was. Last night's accident gave a hint...)

An accident.

That scene was an accident.

A quick and simple solution. Because Kirika had fought with all her strength and was injured, she temporarily lost strength in her legs and slipped. No doubt about it.

(Then there's question number two, why did I feel so strange when I was watching that scene—"

At this moment, Fear heard an especially loud noise, causing her to turn her head.

"W-Wait a sec—!"

"Kono-san, hold this! I'll unbutton the shirt!"

"Wait a minute, I refuse to relinquish the task of unbuttoning!"

"Eh—Then how about I take charge of keeping this thermometer pressed against Haru's skin?"

"U-Umm, I can't let you have that either!"

"...Kono-san, I never knew you were that much of a tyrant."

"Have you two played enough? In any case, can I ask you girls to get down from my body!?"

So noisy. This thought had never crossed Fear's mind before, but she felt increasingly mad about it. She never expected those girls to engage in such shameless behavior while she was not around. Although Fear felt repulsed and shocked, but Haruaki was undoubtedly enjoying this. How could there be such a shameless man?

(...Hmm?)

Very likely, that time on the roof was the same.

Yes, indeed. Definitely the same.

Although it was an accident, Fear had chanced upon a scene of shamelessness. Although Haruaki appeared to be asleep, it was definitely shameless behavior he would enjoy. No, whether he was actually sleeping was suspect. For some reason, Fear felt reluctant to confirm it, but ultimately, that possibility was the most important.

Hence—

What she experienced that night was not heartache but extreme anger. Actually, she could not remember much of the feeling back then, so she was unable to say for sure, but—Yes, that possibility was very likely indeed.

At this moment, the image of Sovereignty surfaced in her mind. Fear felt as though Sovereignty would know something if she asked, but at the same time, she felt that not asking might be better. No no no, that's obvious, this has nothing to do with her. Logically speaking, there's no need to ask her

specifically. If it feels like she might know something, that's just an illusion. Anyway, the strange feeling I felt at the time was simple anger, that's that.

Hence—What the heck, this wasn't anything strange to begin with, really.

"...Yes!"

Just as Fear sat up, the gazes of the trio in the living room settled on her all at once.

"Uwah? Y-You're finally awake, Fear? Hurry and save me!"

"You're asking... me to save you?"

Fear cackled malevolently and moved by spinning around horizontally on the tatami.

"Why am I obliged to save you, shameless brat...? Running back and forth noisily beside me from a while ago, if you want to play doctors and nurses so much, fine, I'll play with you! Examination for confirming the patient's stamina! Tickling punishment!"

"You went off the weird end the minute you mentioned punishment... Wahahaha! S-Stop it right now!"

Instead of listening to Haruaki's pleas, Fear continued to tickle his flank.

"Hehe, serves you right. Even though it's a shameless act with her meat pressing against your body, Cow Tits is doing her job as a stone weight, you can't escape!"

"A stone weight? Y-You're too rude...! Besides, I'm not pressing on his body. I'm simply imitating a nurse who is offering herself to help a disobedient patient undress!"

"I don't really understand Kono-san's excuse, but it sounds quite fun. I'll help out too—tickle tickle."

"H-Hair, you're tickling me with your hair? Wahaha, stop it, Kuroe, that's way too unfair!"

"Well done, Kuroe! I've tasted that tickling effects of that move personally before, go ahead and tickle him as much as you can!"

Fear laughed as she continued with her hands.

There were still many things she could not figure out no matter how hard she thought. Many things where correct answers could not be found.

The cultural festival yesterday, what she heard about in the training hall, as well as what he had said.

Actually, there was no need to force herself to understand everything, right?

Because there were more important things than that.

Ignorant people and things had their own ignorant ways of acting.

So let's do it this way. Perhaps it was not right, but let's do it this way.

Forget about what I don't understand and let myself act as usual in the past.

It's definitely more happy if I do that.

"Fufufu, Haruaki, you've fallen into our hands! If you agree to raise my daily rice cracker rations, releasing you is not a problem!"

"Why is your excuse for bullying me changing again and again!?"

However—

Despite not knowing why things became this way.

Despite lacking an answer no matter how hard she thought.

Fear believed that there was only one thing she should not forget.

Because she felt that it would be too much of a shame if it were forgotten.

Namely, what she felt when Haruaki's lips had made contact with her body.

It had felt exceptionally comfortable.

And exceptionally blissful too.

Afterword

Hello again, I am Minase and I actually love dark-skinned characters a lot. I hereby present C³ V to everyone!

As revealed in the first line already, one of the new characters in this volume is dark-skinned boobs. I've never done it in my past serialized works so this is my very first dark-skinned character. Another thing about her, her name is really hard to pronounce, right... I only noticed it concretely when I was discussing it with the editor on the phone. Who the heck gave this kind of name to her? Me. But anyway, I'm actually quite satisfied with this name.

Then another new character is wet boobs. This shouldn't require further introductions. Who knows if the "theory that girls look cuter when they're wet" started in Ancient Greece or not. It also works if you switch "cuter" to "sexier." Or I suppose it could be said that all the new characters in this volume follow that theme.

Of course, not just the new characters, but the permanent cast also performed to their very best. Please rest assured. This is the cultural festival episode, which allows cosplay opportunities to be maximized unlike normal days. I only saw the drafts when I was writing this afterword, but the illustrations were already super cute...! I not only thank Sasorigatame-sama but also look forward greatly to how the actual illustrations will turn out. Gufufu.

Okay, this time it's the cultural festival episode, so let me chat a bit about the cultural festivals from my high school days—Eh? Why can't I really recall them... But I have some recollections of live performances of the K-On Club. It was quite fun every year. On the other hand, I can't recall what the major class stalls did for three years worth. Instead, I remember a classmate who was especially loli-like and wearing a schoolbag for cosplay for some reason. Unbelievably, she really looked like an elementary schooler. That was really disastrous. But let me take this chance to encourage modern high school students to learn from my negative example. Please try and create memories.

Even more than before, this volume received care from many people. Editor Kawamoto-sama, Sasorigatame-sama who draws such beautiful illustrations every time I could die from moe, Akayumasaki-sama who

readily authorized the minor references and allusions used in the story, as well as everyone involved with the completion of this book—Naturally, I must also thank all the readers who have supported this series. I truly thank all of you from the bottom of my heart! I continue to be in your care!

Well then, let's finish chatting here. Next time will be Volume VI... I will try my best to present it to everyone before spring.

Minase Hazuki

References

1. ↑ Bludgeoning Gentleman Gasha Skull(撲殺紳士ガシャドクロン): Bokusatsu Shinshi Gasha Dokuron, most likely a parody of Bokusatsu Tenshi Dokuro-chan. Dokuro means skull.

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